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JULY 2006

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PWI'S ANNUAL REPORT:
**THE STATE OF THE
GAME**

from the desk of...

WHEN CHARLIE HAAS threw his arms around Davey Richards for a congratulatory hug after being upset in the final round of the 10th annual Super 8 Tournament, Davey's frame was almost completely enveloped by Haas'. It wasn't just that Richards stands 5'8" to Haas' 6'2", but the intensity of the hug was one that you're not likely to see inside a wrestling ring outside of Newark, Delaware.

I e-mailed Haas a photo of the post-match display in which the winner can barely be seen, and he had to laugh. "If I knew I was that much bigger than him," he said, "I wouldn't have lost."

"They don't come any bigger than Charlie," said ECWA owner and tournament director Jim Kettner, who was obviously not speaking of Haas' physical stature. "He's under contract to WWE and making excellent money. He's been to WrestleMania. Why would he come here to enter a tournament against a bunch of relative unknowns in what was basically a no-win situation?"

"Because," Haas said, "Jim Kettner gave me and Russ (Charlie's deceased brother) our break in 1999, and I would do anything for that man. I knew I was the heavy favorite and that it wouldn't look good for me if I didn't win, but now look at Davey Richards. He's on his way. And one day, years from now, maybe he'll give a kid a chance to make a name at his expense."

I attended Super 8 on April 8 (I'm embarrassed to say for the first time). I also attended WrestleMania 22 six days earlier. They were both terrific events, but they were so incredibly different, I almost couldn't believe it was the same sport.

The matches at WrestleMania were fine—some excellent—but they were overshadowed by the vastness of the overall event. WrestleMania, like the Super Bowl, is more spectacle than sport. That's not a bad thing, mind you. If the fans can get an adrenaline rush by just being there, imagine what the wrestlers themselves must experience. That's why some of the greatest matches of the last 22 years have been contested at WrestleMania.

Super 8 is the polar opposite. The "arena" is a Boys and Girls Club with 537 (all filled) seats. Before the show, most of the wrestlers sat behind tables along a couple of the gym walls, shaking hands with the fans and posing for photos.

Before the tournament began, the ring was surrounded by the ECWA roster, paying homage to previous tournament winners and this year's entrants inside the ring. Kettner showed a video of the late Jeffrey Peterson, whose memory was honored in a touching speech delivered by two-time tourney champ Chris Daniels. By the time Jeff's mother and sister came into the ring, tears were flowing freely.

If Jeff were looking down from above, he would have said, "Great stuff; can we start the tournament now?"

I'll never forget this evening, nor will I forget WrestleMania 22. Both events helped to remind me that I am not just a wrestling magazine editor, but a wrestling fan as well.



Two wrestling fans that are quickly learning what it's like to be wrestling editors are Frank Ingiosi and Lisa Rocchi. Frank and Lisa have filled the seats vacated in November by Dave Lenker and Brandi Mankiewicz, in their respective positions of managing editor and associate editor.

Frank's debut column appears on page 116 (and he's already made his—*ahem*—mark on pwi-online.com). Lisa is a little bit more behind the scenes at this point, but I'm sure she'll be known to all of you soon. They're both superb, and I am grateful to have them on board.

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Founder
(1919-2002)

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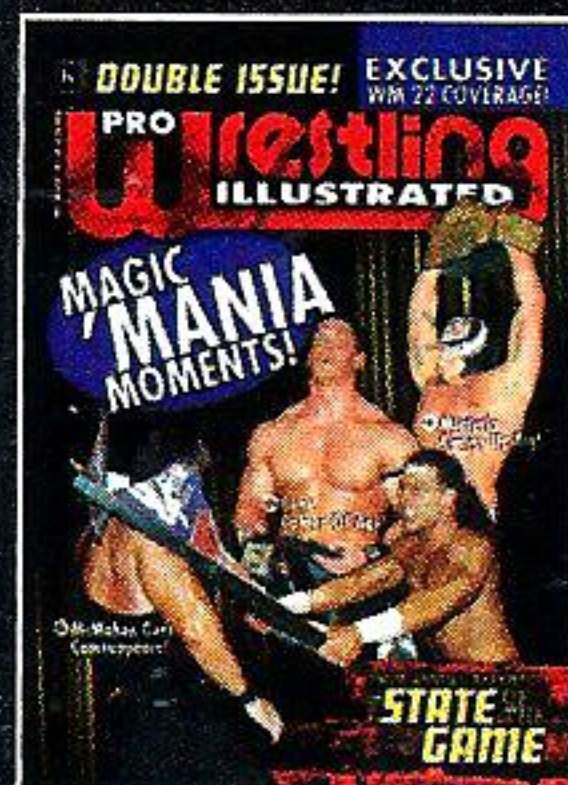
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LOOK FOR THE AUGUST 2006 ISSUE
OF PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED
ON SALE JUNE 27, 2006

before the bell

Compiled by Dan Murphy

Watch This!

The film *Lucha Libre, Life Behind The Mask* is a touching and sentimental look into the lives of three Mexican wrestlers at different phases of their careers, providing a rare insight into the psyches of men who truly compete for the love of their sport. Set against the backdrop of some of the poorest communities in Mexico, the story is told by those who compete in the ring for very little recognition and even less money. The pain is real and the opportunity for fame is virtually nonexistent. Yet their pride runs as deep as the roots of *lucha libre* itself.

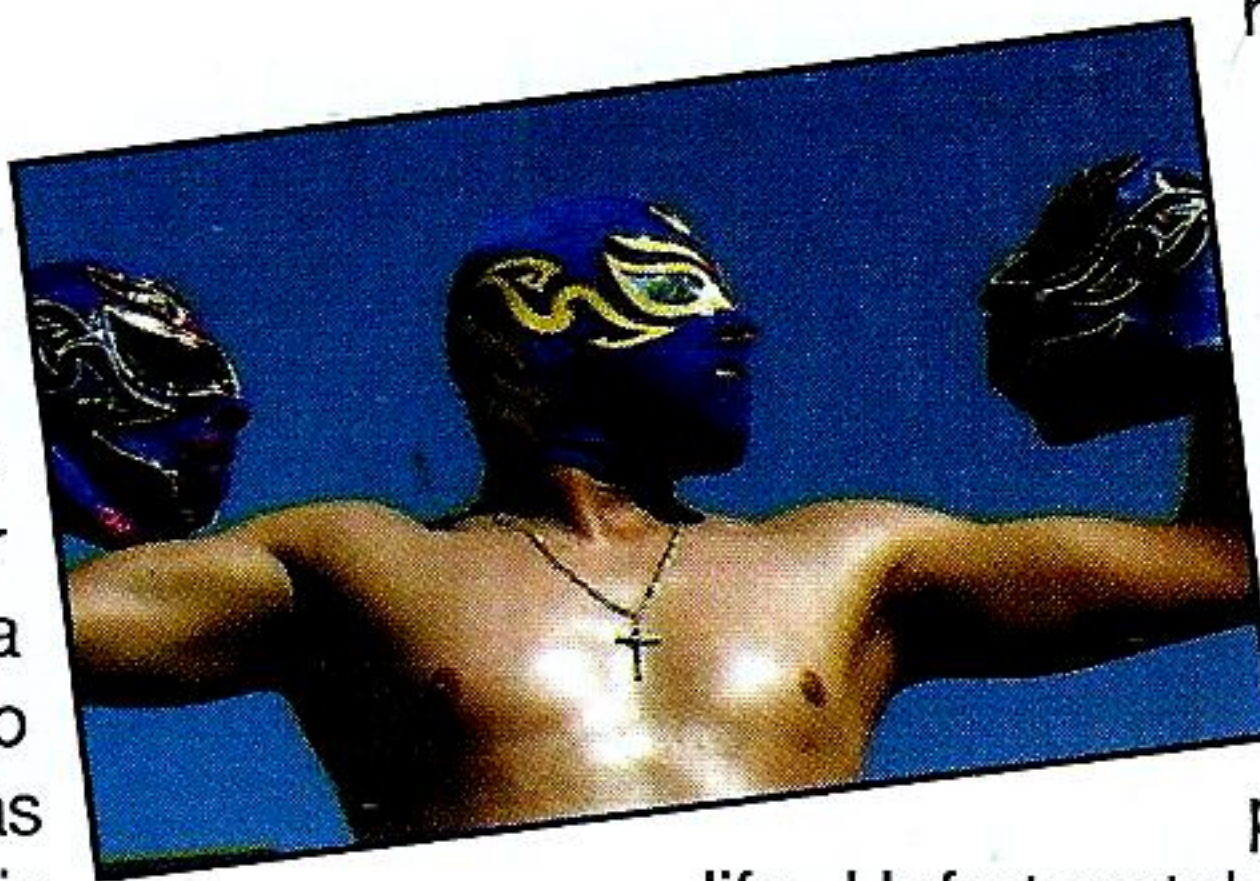
The centerpiece of the story is Enrique Medina, better known in the world of *lucha libre* as "Dinamic." Dinamic is a legend of Mexican wrestling both for his longevity in the sport as well as for wrestling without a mask (Medina forgot his mask once while rushing to the ring for a match, thus there was no longer a reason to conceal his identity). He is widely revered as one of the last of the "old guard" of *luchador*, with a career spanning four decades. At the age of 55, however, Medina is reluctantly facing the stark reality that his in-ring career is winding down.

The audience is introduced next to Kyam, a middle-aged elementary school teacher who is balancing a double life as educator and devoted family man with his passion for *lucha libre*. Wrestling as part of a tag team with his brother, Enigma de Oro, Kyam is considered a *rudo*, or "rulebreaker." His experience inside the squared circle is complimented perfectly by his ability to draw heat from a crowd, regardless of its size. He believes that under his mask he is unconsciously "transformed into another person."

Principe Unlimited is part of the next generation of *lucha libre*. At 28 years old, Principe struggles to manage life as a husband, father, religious missionary, and *luchador*. His life is dedicated to "trying to give everything for people" through his philanthropic and in-ring actions. Principe's in ring persona is that of the *tecnico*, or one who respects the rules of *lucha libre*. He willingly

plays off of the enthusiasm of the fans and dazzles the onlookers with his up-tempo ring presence and general approachability. Despite his relative inexperience in *lucha libre* (somewhat misleading, as he's been at it for a decade), Principe has a firm grasp of the history and honor associated with the sport.

The audience is also introduced to Albert, a 13-year old aspiring *luchador* with dreams of wrestling one day for WWE. Born into *lucha libre* royalty, Albert is the son of Acero Derado and the grandson of Dr. Muerte, both legends of Mexican wrestling. He had been training for a life in wrestling since the age of four and intends to begin a professional career within two years. Despite his age, Albert has a firm grasp on the dedication and respect required of the *luchador*.



Director Rich Walton's first foray into filmmaking is a visually enticing summary of the lifestyle of the *luchador* and *lucha libre*'s socio-cultural influence on the Mexican community. To some, professional wrestling is purely "sports entertainment," yet to those who follow and participate in *lucha libre*, it is a way of life. Unfortunately, the widespread appeal of this film may be limited primarily to fans of professional wrestling. It does not follow a strict, documentary form, as there is really no examination or explanation of the history of *lucha libre* other than each *luchador*'s perspective on the sport.

The intention of the film is not to act as a historical record of Mexican wrestling, but rather provide a look into the human spirit through the use of a common formulaic device. Dinamic represents the past, Kyam and Principe Unlimited are different stages of the present, and Albert is a glimpse into the future. Hence, this is not a documentary so much on *lucha libre* itself, but rather on those who keep the sport alive and thriving in an environment where the economic situations are less than stellar.

We give it four suplexes out of five.

—Frank Ingiosi



Talkin' Trash

Here's a list of the top 10 wrestling-related items you've been talking about lately, and our gut reactions to each.

10. Trish Stratus gets booed at WrestleMania. You mean to tell us the fans like psychotic, faux-lesbians who wrestle in revealing miniskirts?!? Who knew?

9. Sting to assemble team for War Games. You think he still has El Gigante's number on speed dial?

8. Bret Hart skips 'Mania. We guess Ted DiBiase was wrong—some men really don't have a price.

7. The Undertaker remains perfect at 'Mania. He's got to be thinking about hanging up the black hat and going out on top.

6. Alex Shelley and James Mitchell stalk Christian Cage. Maybe Christian should have sprung for the better home security system ... or at least a dog with a bad attitude.

5. RVD has "money-in-the-bank." Hmm, any chance he might be inclined to cashing in at One Night Stand?

4. Foley gets his fiery WrestleMania moment. Joey Styles said it best: "Oh my God!"

3. Victor Quinones found dead. One of Puerto Rico's most influential figures goes before his time.

2. Rey becomes smallest WWE world champion ever. Oddly enough, the cruiserweight glass ceiling remains intact.

1. Cena makes Triple-H tap-out. Guess we'll just have to push back that 11th title win to Backlash.



The Internet Insider

The following wrestling-related items were culled from various wrestling-related Web sites—or were they? See if you can pick out the items that were actually reported on the Internet (which doesn't necessarily mean they are true) and the ones we blatantly made up. The answers appear at the end of this column on page 9.

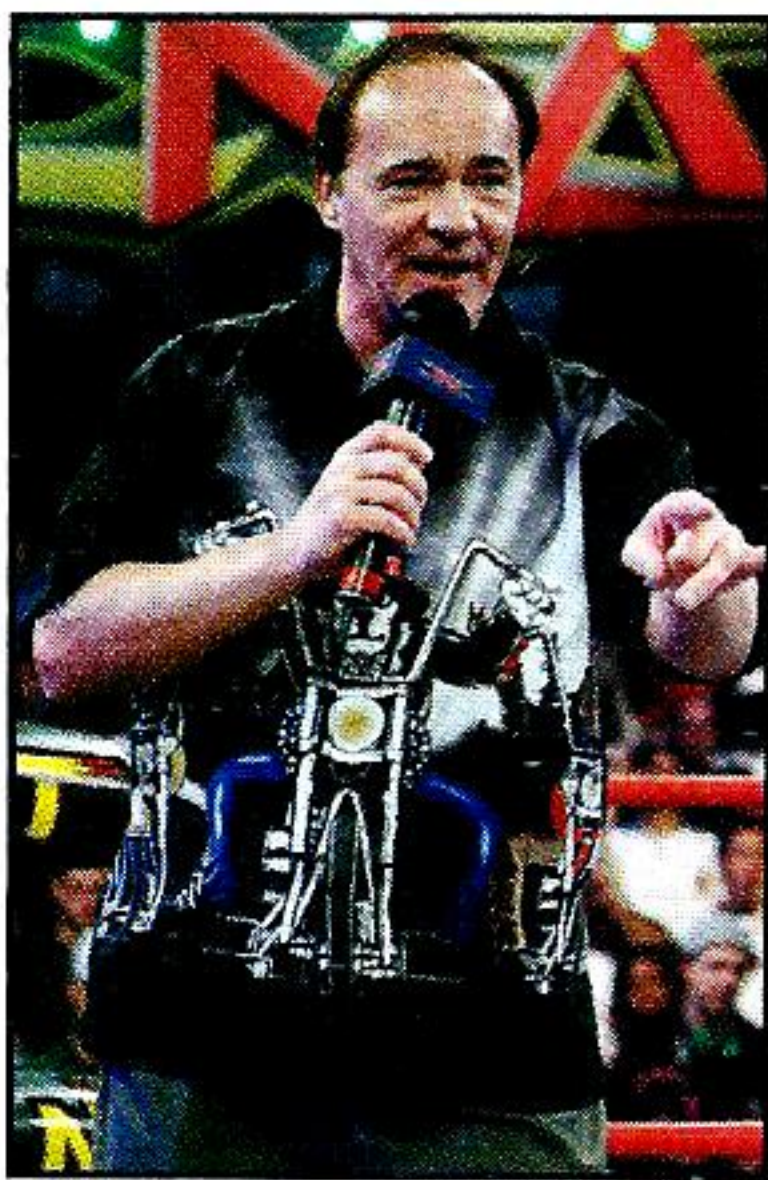
1) Going into WrestleMania 22, the WWE Creative team bounced around several names as marquee opponents for Hulk Hogan. Some of the names included Steve Austin, The Rock, Kurt Angle ... and Greg "The Hammer" Valentine. The 54-year-old Valentine looked to be a done deal until Hogan, 52, put the kibosh on the match, saying "The Hammer" was "too old." An offended Valentine fired back by saying if he had faced Hogan, he would have torn out Hogan's fake hip.

2) "Mean" Gene Okerlund taught the WWE crew a few things about partying the night of the Hall of

Fame Induction Ceremony. After kicking back a few cocktails with Hogan, Gene painted Chi-town red, hitting some of the city's poshest clubs along with M-N-M, Matt Hardy, and Candice Michelle. "Everywhere we went, Gene was the life of the party," Hardy told friends. "Okerlund is a wild man!"

3) It's no secret that Larry Zbyszko is losing his hair, but it looks like he's going to lose a lot more in the ring. Larry is planning on getting a hair weave, but before he does, he's going to have to shave off all the hair he currently has. Zbyszko asked TNA management to find him a storyline where he will lose his hair, possibly as a stipulation in a match involving Raven.

4) After WrestleMania, some fans were buzzing with speculation about a DX reunion. However, Tatanka has been pushing for a different reunion of a former stable—The Million Dollar Corporation. Since returning to WWE in January, Tatanka has been pushing to be paired back with Ted DiBiase and for WWE to hire King Kong Bundy and Mike "Irwin R. Schyster" Rotunda. The idea is getting some serious consideration by Creative.



Bizarro 12 Questions With ... Konnan

We value our health, which is why there are certain questions that we'd never ask certain professional wrestlers during an interview. These are those questions:

12. So, when should we expect to see Vampiro in LAX?

11. It looks like you're trying single-handedly to reverse the "Armstrong Curse." What say you?

10. A slapjack? Seriously, isn't that kind of a fruity weapon?

9. Do you own stock in a bandana company or are you too cheap to spring for hair plugs?

8. Read any good books lately?

7. LAX ... wasn't that the show with Heather Locklear?

6. Why did Schwarzenegger spell it "Conan"?

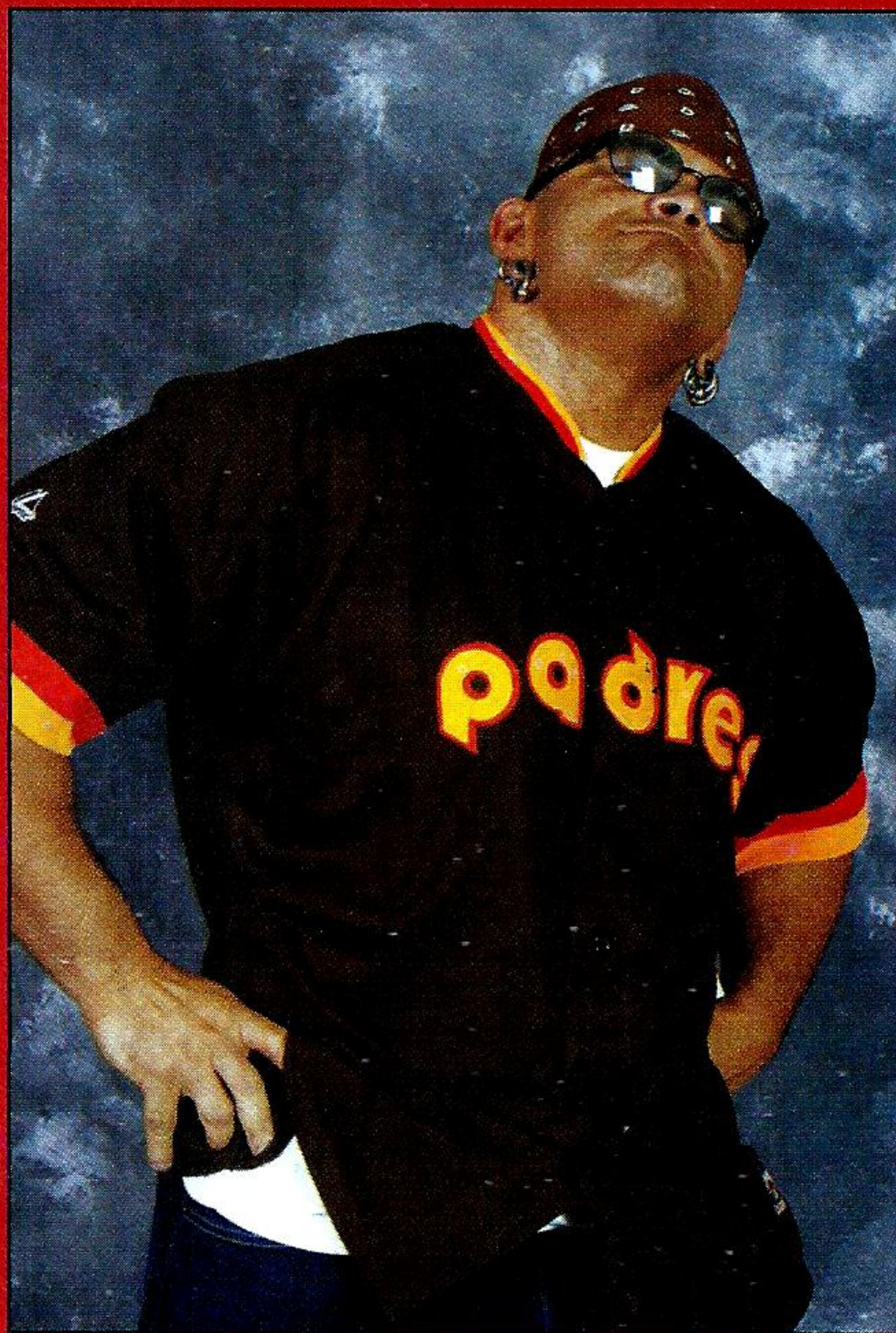
5. Who will history regard as a greater WCW U.S. champion, you or the man you beat for the belt, One Man Gang?

4. Is there any way you could get me Machete's autograph?

3. Our readers want to know: ¿Cuál es más macho? Bar soap or body wash?

2. Hey, do you even wrestle anymore?

1. ¿Habla inglés?



We Heard That!

"The sad truth of it is that if [the Montreal Screwjob] hadn't happened, I would have found a way to stay with the company. I also believe with a great deal of certainty that my brother Owen's accident would never have happened. I know how we interacted, and Owen used to come to me about every little thing. I know if he would have come to me and said, 'They want to do this thing where they lower me from the ceiling.' I would have said, 'Why would you put your life on the line like that?' and I would have shot it down because we were terrified of heights."

—Bret Hart, discussing what might have been, in an interview with *Sports Illustrated* reporter Arash Markazi

"Here is the sad thing. He is a 60-year-old billionaire ... and he's working out lifting weights? That's sad."

—Jim Cornette takes a shot at Vince McMahon and his ubiquitous *Muscle & Fitness* magazine cover on the *Get In The Ring* radio show

"Each sort of person has a sort of repertoire, a set of moves, that they're known for. And so it kind

of turns into a dance, kind of like, 'she does her part, I do my part.' And it turns into the dance, which is a little, you know, violent and hurts sometimes, but it has a beautiful story."

—Trish Stratus (sounding like she has confused herself with Stacy Keibler) on describing the art of women's wrestling on *Showbiz Tonight*

"As far as the rumors, they're always going to be out there, huh? I actually find them entertaining at times. Let's put it this way: I wouldn't do anything at this point to set me back with my training ... and that includes surgery. It's amazing what a good bra can do!"

—Michelle McCool, noting that rumors of the surgical expansion of her bust have been greatly exaggerated, on MichelleMcCool.net



"Wasn't Mandisa that lady wrestler with the big nose and big boobs on WCW? Whatever happened to her? What, she's on *American Idol*? Is that what happens to pro wrestlers when they get old?"

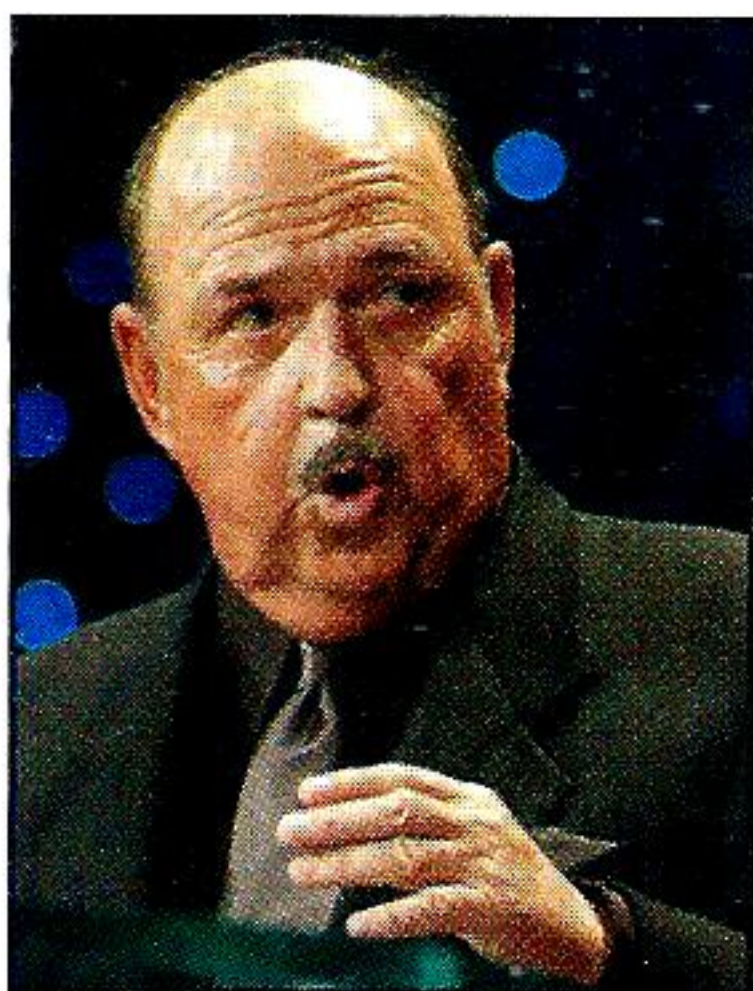
—Comedian Adam Carolla on his radio show, apparently confusing the *American Idol* contestant with Madusa

"I guess I was shocked. Really, there are only a couple of non-wrestlers in the Hall, one of them being Vince Sr. It's a real exciting thing for me being the first announcer to go into the WWE Hall of Fame, and I'm damn proud of it."

—"Mean" Gene Okerlund on his reaction to being inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame, in an interview on www.wrestlingobserver.com

"WrestleMania VII when Elizabeth came down to the ring, fought off Sherri Martel, and her and Randy Savage reunited. That was years in the making. Anybody who didn't cry at that moment has no soul."

—ROH and IWA Mid-South regular Jimmy Jacobs, revealing his unlikely favorite WrestleMania moment in an interview with SLAM! Wrestling



February's Best

WWE films proudly presents: *Brokeback Mountain 2: Back To The Bunkhouse*.

—Frank G. Loyd, Richwood, WV

"Thank you, sir, may I have another?"

—Tomas Bruce, Newark, NJ

"Tonight on *CNN Live*, how this man, JBL, rose from the cracks of being Yosemite Sam's nephew to the 'wrestling god' he is today."

—Denise Carter, Stony Plain, Alberta

"See, the strategy to smart investing involves diversifying your portfolio and ... oh, wait ... hold on one second. 'Look at me! I'm a cowboy now! Yee-hah!' Okay, so where was I?"

—Martin Green, New York, NY

"Introducing the first in a *looong* line of lame characters. Maybe I should've spoofed J.R. Ewing earlier."

—John Herron, Marble Hill, MD

caption me!

Think you're a better writer than the editors at *PWI*? Here's your chance to prove it, punk! This classic shot of Paul E. Dangerously scolding the elderly demands a short, concise, and down-right uproarious caption. If you think you're up to the task, e-mail your zany quips to prowrestlingillustrated@yahoo.com, or slap a stamp on an envelope and snail-mail it to "Caption Me!" Box 1148, Fort Washington, PA 19034. Three issues from now, we'll share with you the best of the bunch—and the funnier the better.



Answers to Internet Insider:

Items 2 and 4 are totally made up.

ringside

With Will Welsh

THE ANNOUNCEMENT BY **Paul Heyman** didn't receive a whole lot of publicity, as it occurred during an otherwise non-descript WWE house show in Long Island, New York, but it should have: ECW One Night Stand is coming back for a second night. This year's show, like the last, is to be held in New York City's Hammerstein Ballroom, and, just like last year, ticket prices are going to be expensive and very hard to come by.

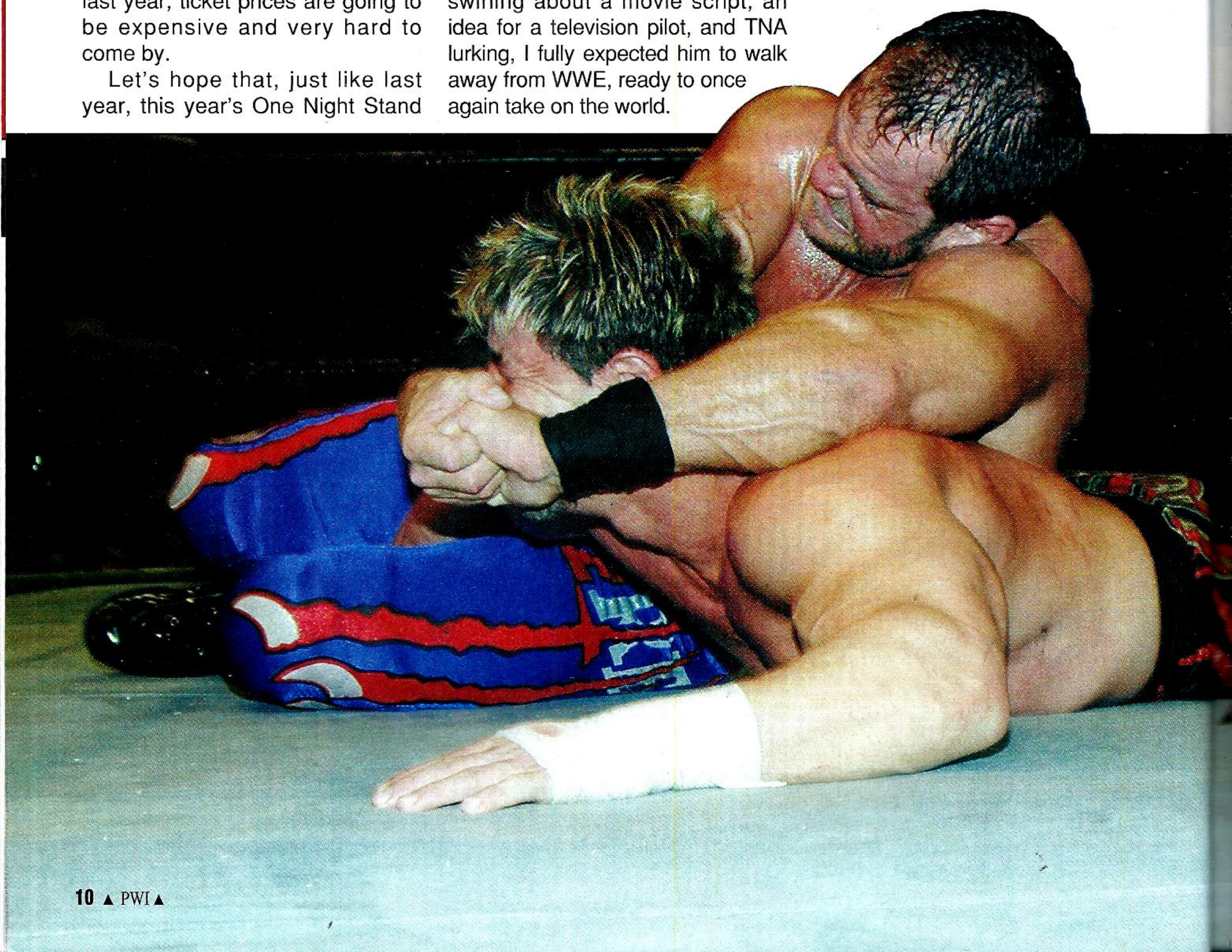
Let's hope that, just like last year, this year's One Night Stand

can live up to the hype. There are reasons why it may not. Then again, there's one very big reason why it may, and probably will, surpass expectations, and that reason is Paul Heyman.

Truth be told, I'm surprised that Heyman is the one who announced the pay-per-view. His contract with WWE was set to have expired at the end of 2005, and, with rumors swirling about a movie script, an idea for a television pilot, and TNA lurking, I fully expected him to walk away from WWE, ready to once again take on the world.

Who knows, maybe he still will. Neither WWE nor Heyman have alluded to him signing a new long-term contract, even as the former ECW owner continues to show up at Ohio Valley Wrestling's television tapings in order to fulfill his role as the promotion's booker. Not one peep has been made about his status with WWE, yet as winter turned into spring, Heyman was still working with OVW, which seems to indicate that he'll still be with WWE, possibly beyond One Night Stand.

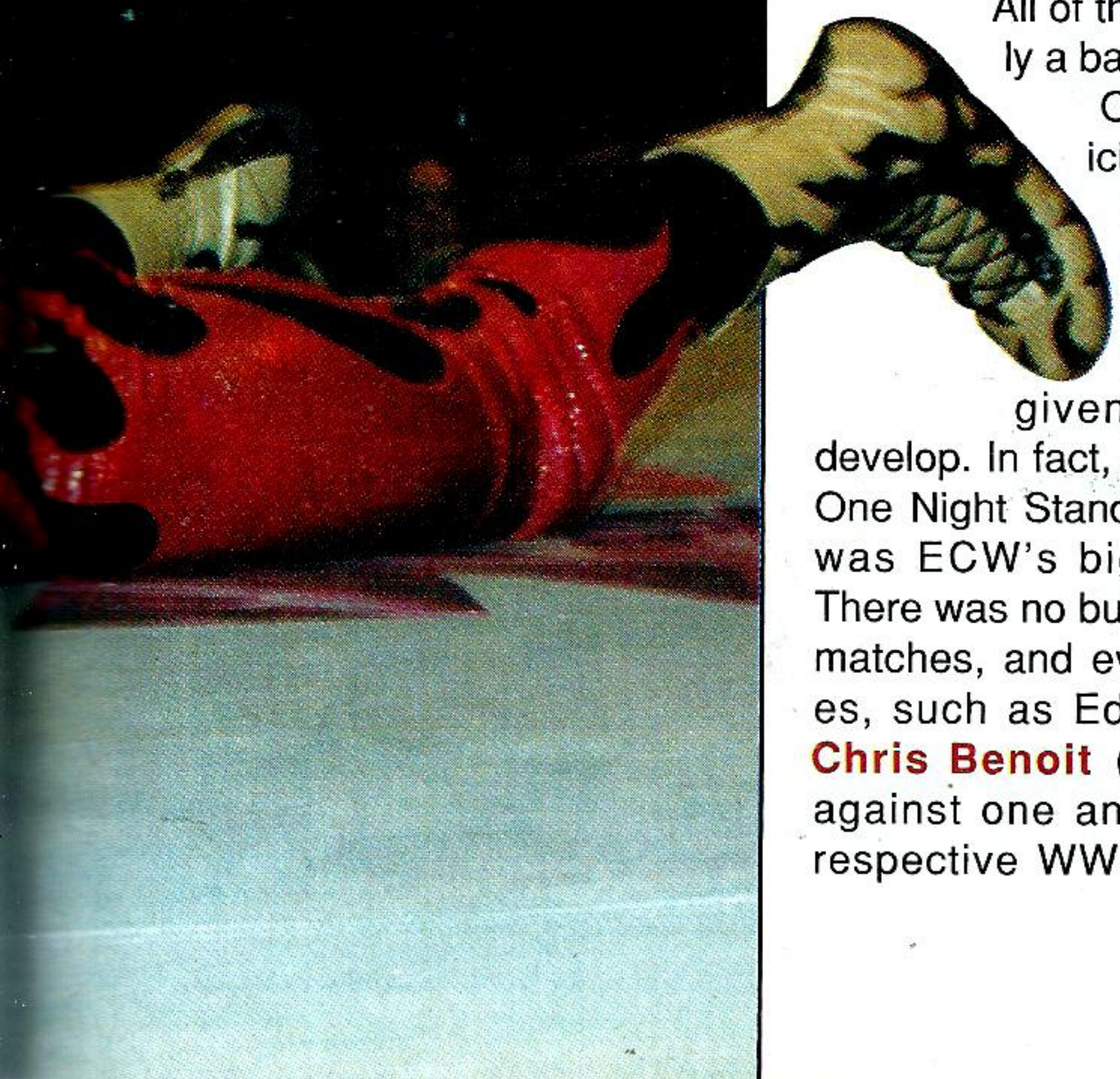
Without Heyman, the chances of One Night Stand succeeding diminish. Yes, **Tommy Dreamer** could still book the pay-per-view, but Heyman is the visionary who made ECW happen. In the days following Heyman's announcement, I spoke with a number of fans, openly wondering whether or not Paul E. and





Paul Heyman (above) and Tommy Dreamer will have their work cut out for them when WWE promotes its second ECW One Night Stand. Surpassing last year's event will be quite a challenge.

Whether due to personnel changes or tragic losses, such as Public Enemy's Johnny Grunge and Eddie Guerrero (here with Chris Benoit), ECW's One Night Stand II will feature less talent from the promotion's past. However, fewer matches would allow matches to fully develop, which was one of the few complaints voiced after the 2005 show.



other former ECW stars could pull it off a second time. After all, I was told one of the main reasons why the first One Night Stand was so successful was because it had been five years since ECW had gone under without saying goodbye. It was the fans' chance to give a final farewell to those wrestlers they had come to idolize, and it was the wrestlers' chance to celebrate the promotion's rich past and gain closure after years spent pondering what could have been.

Admittedly, this year's One Night Stand won't have the same kind of emotional appeal as last year's. And it will also have a somewhat trimmed down list of names for WWE from which to pull. The former **Dudley Boyz** are now in TNA, as is **Rhino**. **Eddie**

Guerrero is no longer with us. Neither is **Johnny Grunge**. Other wrestlers who were on the WWE roster during last year's show now aren't, and WWE may have to do some convincing in order to get guys like **Chris Jericho**, **Tajiri**, and **Matt "Spike Dudley" Hyson** to appear and wrestle on the card.

All of this is not necessarily a bad thing.

One of the main criticisms of last year's One Night Stand is that the card was too rushed and the matches weren't given enough time to develop. In fact, if there's one thing One Night Stand was lacking in, it was ECW's big-match appeal. There was no build-up to any of the matches, and even dream matches, such as Eddie Guerrero vs. **Chris Benoit** (their first match against one another since their respective WWE and World title

reigns), disappointed due to time constraints.

With what should be a somewhat more limited roster of wrestlers to select from for this year's show, it's quite possible that One Night Stand '06 might actually be more aesthetically pleasing. The matches should be better, longer, and provide more of an authentic ECW atmosphere.

And, yeah, we'll all probably get to relive Sandman's incredible entrance—probably my favorite entrance of any wrestler I've covered in the course of my career—one more time.

This year's One Night Stand might also have a very special thing that last year's event didn't: a healthy **Rob Van Dam**. It broke RVD's heart when he wasn't able to wrestle on last year's show. He stayed with the company until its very end, and it was actually his pitch to **Vince McMahon** for the pay-per-view that got the idea off of the ground. He wanted to wrestle so badly, and when he wasn't able to, he did the only thing of which he was capable: He went out and delivered, hands-down, the best promo of his career.

Barring injury, RVD will be at this year's One Night Stand, and, if my feeling is correct, he will be its centerpiece. All of the other wrestlers will get their chance to shine, but if WWE and Heyman are smart (and I know at least one of them is), RVD will be given at least 45 minutes of match time and an opponent against whom he can excel.

Who knows, he may even decide to use his "Money-In-The-Bank" title shot at the pay-per-view. What a spectacle that would be!

In other news, **Randy Orton** has been suspended by WWE for at least 60 days for what the company is describing as "unprofessional conduct." Though WWE didn't go into further details, Orton has developed a bit of a reputation on the road, and it's likely this suspension is WWE's way of telling him to settle down.

"WWE has certain standards of conduct they expect out of all the

Former World champion Randy Orton received a 60-day suspension for "unprofessional conduct." This comes on the heels of his involvement in a three-way with Kurt Angle and Rey Mysterio Jr. in Smackdown's main event at WrestleMania.



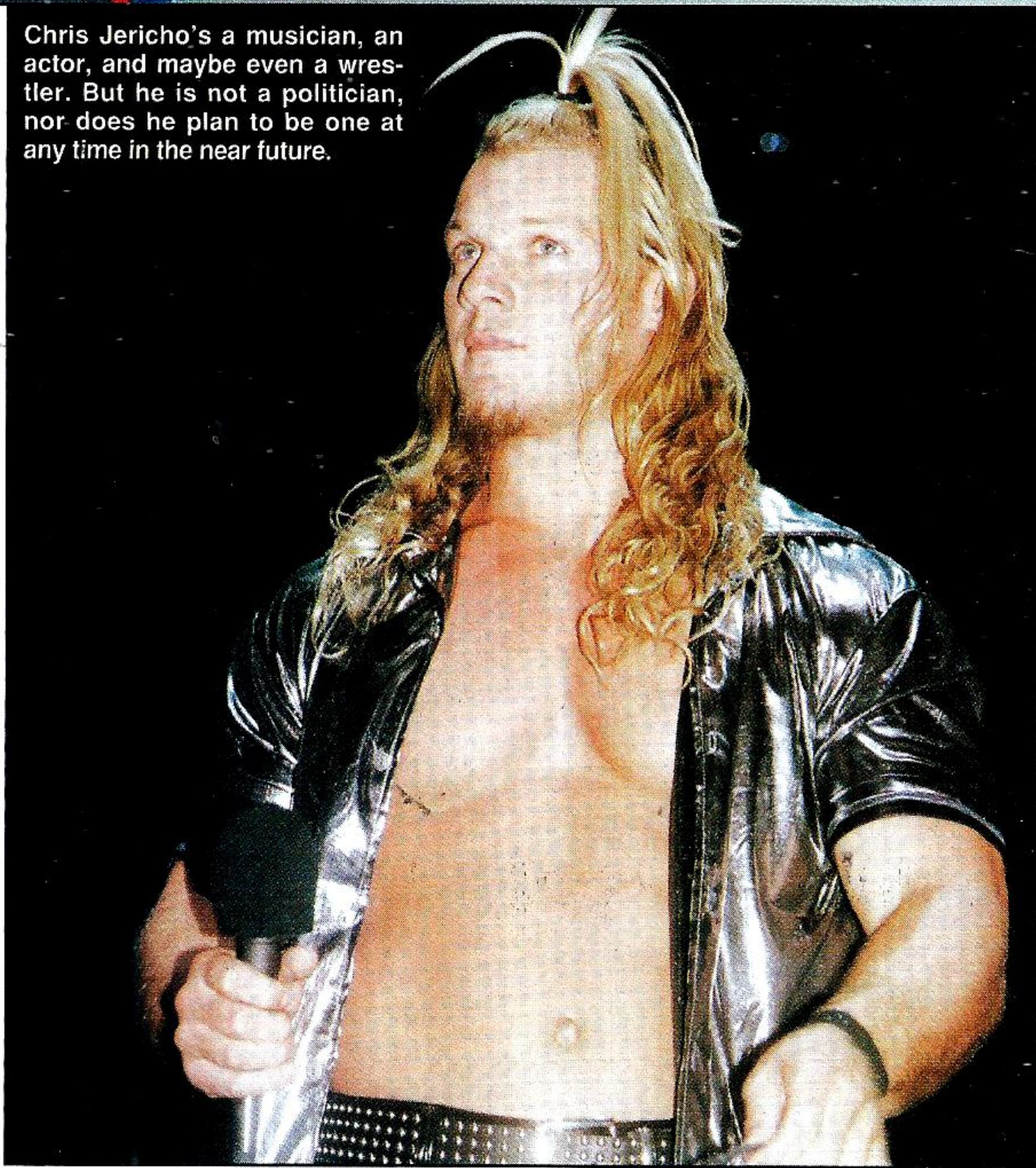
Superstars on both Raw and Smackdown," Orton told WWE.com after learning of his suspension. "Unfortunately, I violated those standards and was not representing WWE the way I should have been. Basically, my conduct was unbecoming of a champion, which is what I will be again when I return."

My final item is about something that could well have happened but didn't. Former undisputed champion **Chris Jericho** is *not* running for the provincial Tory leadership in his hometown of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The reason this is news is because several publications ran with the story as fact, based on an article in *The Winnipeg Sun*, dated April 1. Yes, April 1.

I'm proud to say that *PWI* did not run with the story. Our journalistic training required that we verify the report with three sources before accepting it as valid. (Either that, or we read an admission by another publication of being duped.) Either way, aren't April Fool's gags dumb?

That does it for me this month, fans. Enjoy your wanderings. □

Chris Jericho's a musician, an actor, and maybe even a wrestler. But he is not a politician, nor does he plan to be one at any time in the near future.



in focus

By Dave Lenker

LOOKING AHEAD TO WRESTLEMANIA 23

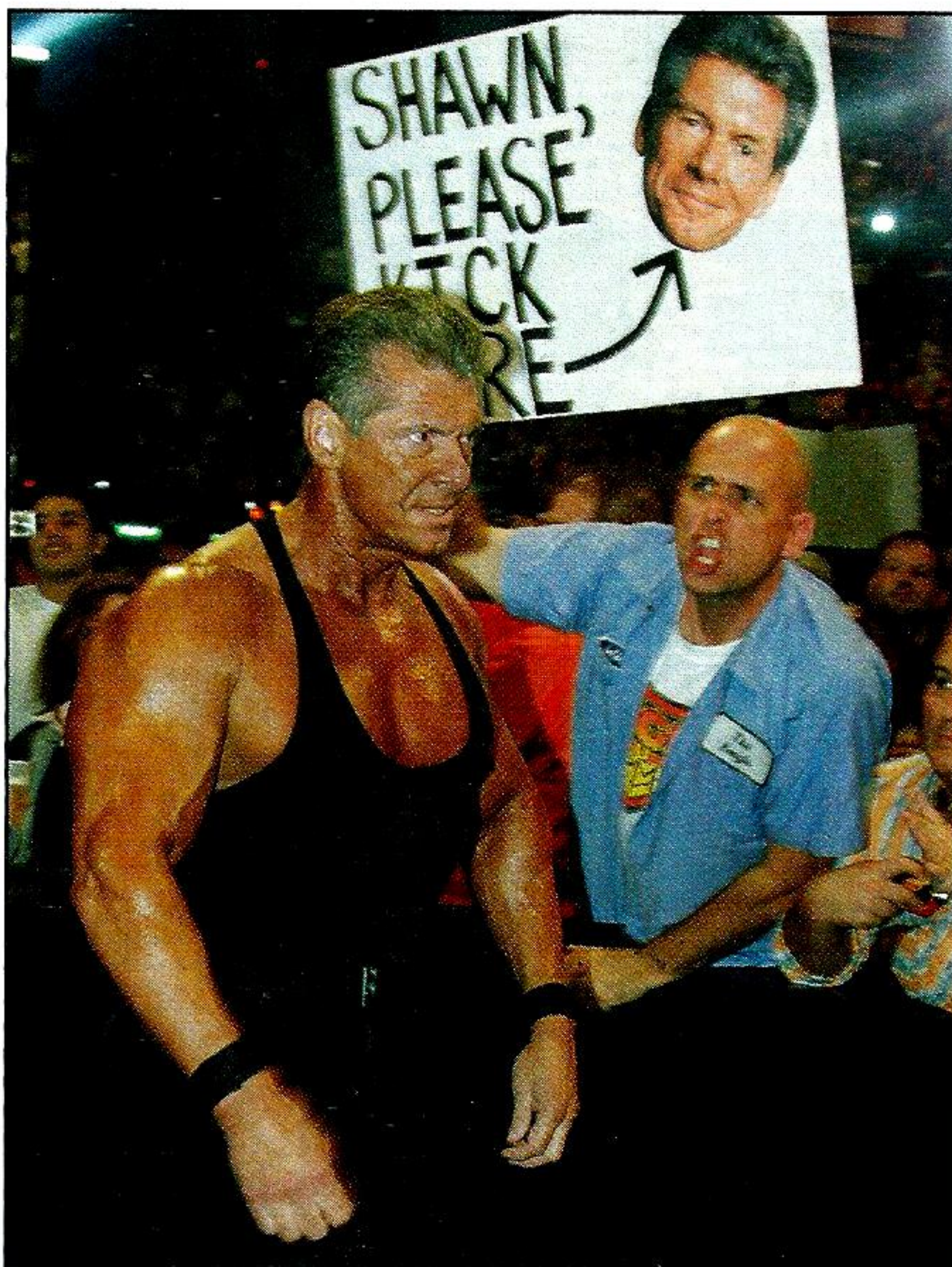
You'll get your fill of WrestleMania 22 coverage (it was certainly a better show than I expected it to be) starting on page 74. I enjoy looking back on the year's show of shows as much as anyone. What I enjoy even more, however, is looking at next year's show of shows. Twenty years after 93,173 filed into the Pontiac Silverdome in suburban Detroit to watch Hulk Hogan bodyslam 1,494-pound Andre the Giant (or so Hogan will have you believe if his tales of that night get any taller), wrestling fans from around the world will file into Detroit's Ford Field to see more history made. I'm not out to predict exactly what that card will look like, but here are five things to look for/not look for/hope for/not hope for ... whatever.

Hulk Hogan vs. Steve Austin ... finally, but too late.

The matchup of the two biggest stars in WWE history was a subject of a lot of debate around the *PWI* offices six months or so ago. Was it WrestleMania worthy in 2006, or not? It didn't matter. It was teased for all of one night on WWE TV back in October, and that was it. I'm here to tell you it better happen in 2007 if it's going to happen at all. The reasons are obvious. I

think it will happen, but I don't think I'll look forward to it. It'll be billed as the biggest match in WWE history and will struggle mightily to live up to the hype. In the end, there will be some tough spots to watch. Still, it'll be mostly worth watching, but we'll wonder how big it could have been had it happened in 1997 instead.

"The King Of Kings" will go back on his throne at the conclusion of the main event. Now that'd be a pretty safe bet to make for any



Many fans apparently share the same sentiment as Dave Lenker—WrestleMania would be better off if it were McMahon-free. The chairman hinted that "Mr. McMahon's" days on-screen would be coming to an end soon. That was over a year-and-a-half ago.

pay-per-view featuring Raw superstars. How do I know this will happen? Simple—because it didn't happen at WrestleMania 22. Seriously, when it hit me that "The Game" had lost the World title cleanly at 'Manias XX and 21, I figured it was a sure thing he'd be pinning John Cena in Chicago on April 2. You really think he'll lose four 'Mania main events in a row? Don't tell me you don't think he'll be in the main event at Ford Field.

Vince McMahon should not be at WrestleMania 23. Okay, of course he'll physically be at the show, but he shouldn't be in front of the camera at all, unless he wants to introduce the Hall of Fame Class of 2007 himself. I could have sworn that I read interviews several years ago in which the WWE chairman said that "Mr. McMahon's" days in the limelight were just about over. Not only was he in front of the camera at 'Mania this year, but his match with Shawn Michaels got more hype than any other. Granted, it turned out to be an entertaining spectacle, as HBK leaped off the top of a 2,643-foot ladder (it only looked like a standard 12-foot ladder) to elbow Vince through a table, but I truly believed that the thrashing the 60-year-old megalomaniac took would signal his disappearance from WWE TV. Instead, he was back the very next night to sign a match pitting him and his son against HBK and God for Backlash. If he's still a prominent character on TV at the start of 2007, we're all in trouble, and it'll have been a long previous eight months. Please don't tell me Vince is building to him vs. God, one-on-one in Detroit. Sadly, I wouldn't be shocked.

Edge should be in the main event. If you follow the business side of this

industry closely, you know that Edge was a ratings hit during his cup-of-coffee reign as WWE champion earlier this year. After watching his hardcore match with Mick Foley, it dawned on me that he is the most entertaining wrestler on the WWE roster right now. He might be the most well-rounded star, too. I could do without any of the live sex show salaciousness, but I love the partnership with Lita and the grit that Edge brings to WWE TV every Monday night. If we could ignore my comment about Triple-H a few paragraphs above, how about John Cena vs. Edge for the WWE title at Ford Field, and let the fans decide who they want to cheer for between now and then.

Batista gets healthy and stays healthy (we should hope).

"The Animal" is one of the few "new," big WWE stars who isn't a particularly great wrestler but is still beloved and respected by today's fickle fans. Really, I'd rate him and John Cena about equal in terms of ring skills. Heck, Cena is probably a little better. Yet Batista hasn't heard many boos since he won the World title more than a year ago. He got one of the bigger reactions when he made a cameo at WrestleMania 22 to confront Randy Orton. WWE has missed his star power since he went on the DL. He needs to be in one of the big matches in Detroit.

WHEN IS ENOUGH ENOUGH?

Rey Misterio Jr.'s victory for the World title at WrestleMania 22 wasn't exactly stunning. Anyone who had watched any part of the do-it-for-Eddie drama in the months leading up to April 2 had to get the feeling that Rey was going to get to hoist that big gold belt toward the



Every time WWE makes the fans believe they're done with exploiting the death of Eddie Guerrero, they pull us back in! Just when it seemed like Rey Misterio Jr.'s unlikely title victory would signal the end of Eddie's posthumous involvement in WWE storylines, enter Chavo Jr. and his nervous breakdown.

heavens at some point, most likely at the biggest show of 2006.

Too bad it wasn't exactly a moment for all of us to remember and cherish, either. Nine minutes, out-of-nowhere finish, no confetti falling from the ceiling. That's what happens when you have two brands to showcase at 'Mania. One's big title match inevitably gets overshadowed, and until Triple-H gets traded, it's going to be Smackdown's.

However, Misterio's win made me smile if for no other reason than it meant Eddie Guerrero could finally rest in peace ... or at least stop watching over WWE and making

sure Rey won the big one for him.

Then, about 23 hours later, Chavo Guerrero Jr. came out on *Raw* and vowed to have his WrestleMania moment a day late and win the Intercontinental title from Shelton Benjamin (and, as I both expected and lamented, continue to shamelessly milk the "Eddie! Eddie!" chants from the crowd as he wrestled).

Judging from the relative positions on the card of Guerrero and Benjamin of late, I didn't expect him to make good on his promise. You know the rest. A disappointed Chavito "quit" WWE moments later. And so the exploitation of Eddie continued.

I know he isn't the talent Uncle Eddie was, but I'm still all for WWE giving Chavo Jr. a push. He hasn't been at all interesting to watch since his old man screwed up the deal Chavo got from WWE during his golden years as a wrestler and broke up the Chavo Jr./Chavo Classic on-air partnership. I like Chavo Jr. much more as a heel than I like him as the undersized, underdog babyface, so I *could be* intrigued to see where this is all ultimately going to go.

What I fear is that this is all going to be about Eddie again. Maybe Chavo Jr. will suffer a nervous breakdown because he couldn't do as Rey Jr. did and make Eddie proud. Or maybe WWE will—mercifully—give us all a break and steer this storyline away from any and all references to Eddie, who must have other things to do by now as he gazes down from above. I wish I had confidence that this will happen. Why do I get the feeling that a few months from now, I'll be longing for the return of Kerwin White. □

off the top rope

By Brandi Mankiewicz

If you wish to contribute to Brandi's mailbag, send your letters to:
TOP ROPE Box 1148 Ft. Washington, PA 19034
 Or send e-mail to: offthetoprobe@yahoo.com

(Editor's note: The opinions expressed in this column are those of the letter writers and Brandi Mankiewicz herself. They do not necessarily reflect the editorial views of this magazine.)

I'VE RECEIVED QUITE a bit of mail accusing me of hating wrestling. Let me answer that accusation with one of my own: Anybody who has a problem me critiquing this business hates honesty. The fact is, I love wrestling. It's still my life regardless of my current station. I just miss the good ol' days.

I did see a bright spot recently, in TNA of all places. It was the vignette of Simon Diamond in Arizona at the Chicago White Sox baseball camp. Diamond's vocal delivery and actions were vintage Tully Blanchard, circa 1985. I know Tully was one of Diamond's all-time favorites, so it did my black heart good. By the end of his schtick, I was again a wrestling fan. Sure, the whole thing had nothing to do with actual wrestling, but then, neither did Sunshine working on the Von Erich farm. It was just something fun to throw in the mix. Too bad the WWE writers have never heard of Sunshine, Blanchard, or the Von Erichs.

In honor of Diamond's outstanding performance as a baseball player-turned-wrestler-turned-baseball player, I will once again step up to the plate as your champion. Hell, I'm probably the only good thing to look forward to in this business these days.

Dear Brandi,

WWE can't face up to the fact that it needs to change its ways. Vince McMahon only cares about money, and not about the fans who pay to watch his shows and pay-per-views. Eventually, he'll do what Ted Turner did with WCW and run it into the ground. It is a shame that WWE has resorted to cheap humor, while going wayward on its wrestling. The fact that it has to use the death of revered superstar and a man pushing his hand up a plastic ass to advance storylines is truly disgusting.

The Eugene character is in bad taste to people with a mentally disabled family member. Because Nick Dinsmore agreed to play the character makes him just as guilty. Likewise, I am shocked that Rey Mysterio, Chavo Guerrero Jr., and Chris Benoit would participate in storylines involving Eddie Guerrero.

Vince McMahon has become power hungry and I personally can't wait for WWE to go belly up, or at least change its act. In the meantime, I will be watching TNA.

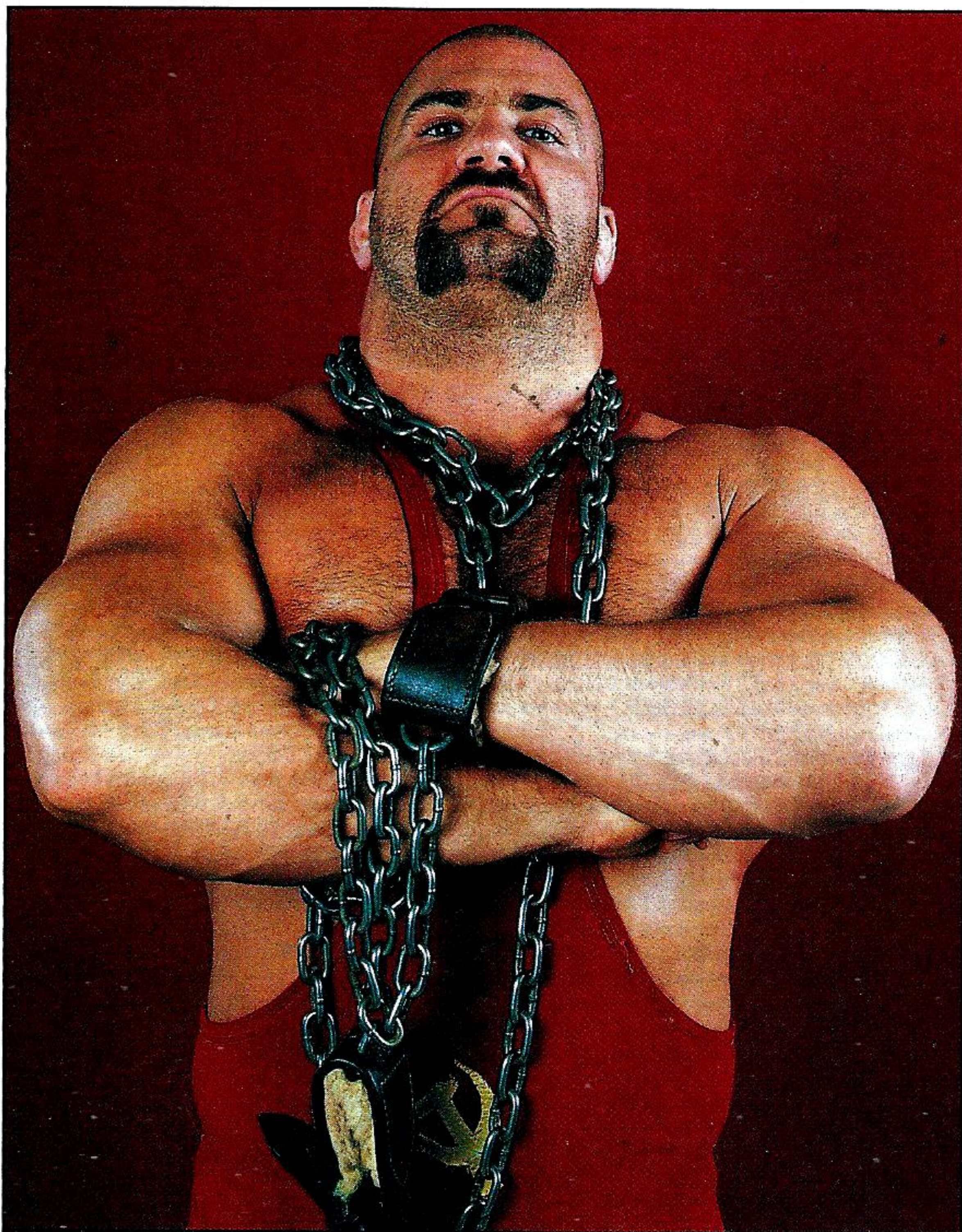
BILLY STRACHAN, 15
 Rothes, Scotland

Dear Billy,

Hey, slow down, kiddo! That's a lot of pent up rage for someone so young. You're only 15. Please reserve the true hatred to those who deserve it ... like me. Now, I do agree with some of what you wrote, but I think you take it too far. First off, Ted Turner had nothing to do with WCW's downfall; Time Warner did. Actually, I'm not so sure they're to blame, either. The blame should be placed on the WCW brass itself for spending lavishly and stupidly. As for Eugene, so what if Nick



TNA needs to do more with this guy. Simon has the cool demeanor of Tully Blanchard—even when he's taunting a baseball player like A.J. Pierzynski of the Chicago White Sox. Thanks to Simon, I may actually have a reason to tune into TNA's shows each week.



Nikita Koloff was billed from Russia, but he didn't have a green card. What does that tell us?

Dinsmore wasn't mentally disabled. Wrestling stereotypes have been around since the carny days. Ask Nikita Koloff. He wasn't Russian, but he did a damn good impersonation of one. Dusty Rhodes did a great impersonation of an athlete.

I do agree that it's beyond cheap to use Eddie's death to promote anything. Granted, Eddie might have truly wanted it that way since he was a company man. That thought doesn't make my skin crawl any less, though.

You're also off-base about Vince McMahon. He's always been power hungry. That's why Vince Sr. is still rolling over in his grave.

Dear Brandi,

Is Michelle McCool still under con-

tract with the WWE? I like to see her in the ring.

MIKE JONES

soulplower@aol.com

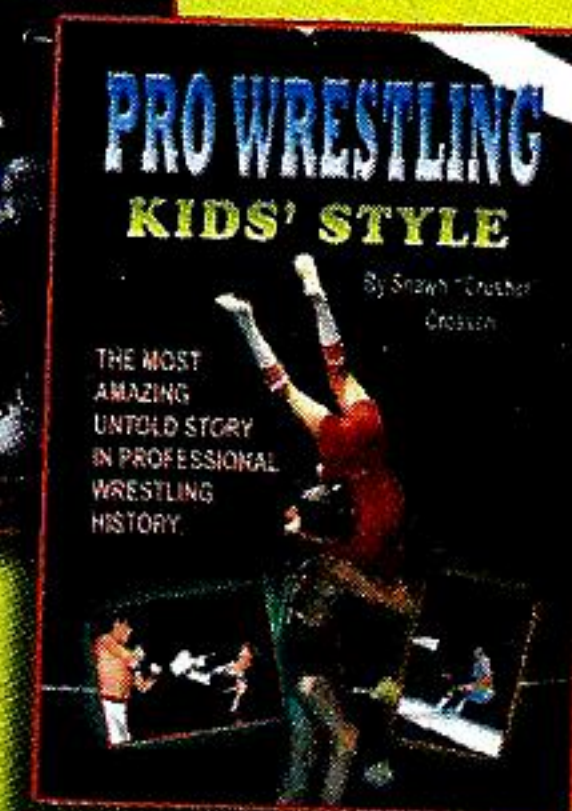
P.S. Can I get a picture of you? No perverted reason; I just don't know what you look like.

Dear Mike,

McCool is, shall we say, honing her craft in WWE developmental Deep South Wrestling, with an occasional appearance in OVW. She is indeed still under contract.

And, no, you can't have a picture of me. Nice Freudian slip there. You brought up the pervert thing first. That must mean it was on your mind when you were writing this note. Go back under a rock. Be lucky that you can still read my words. It's all you're getting. □

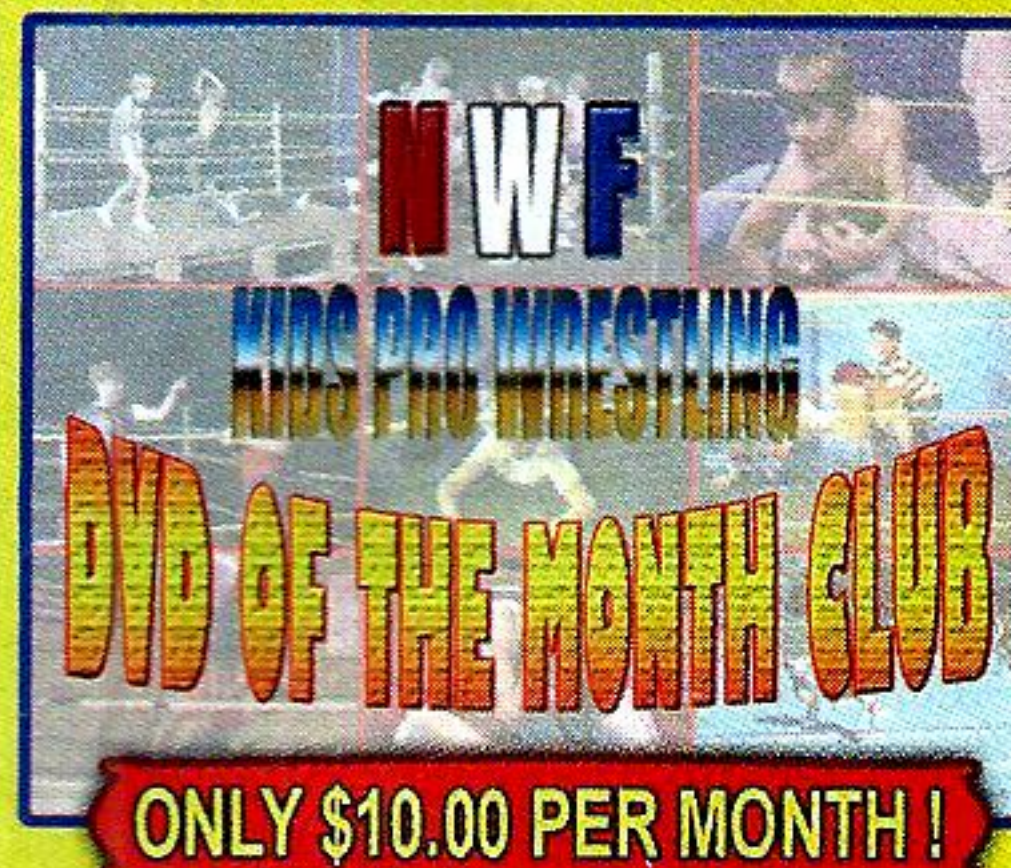
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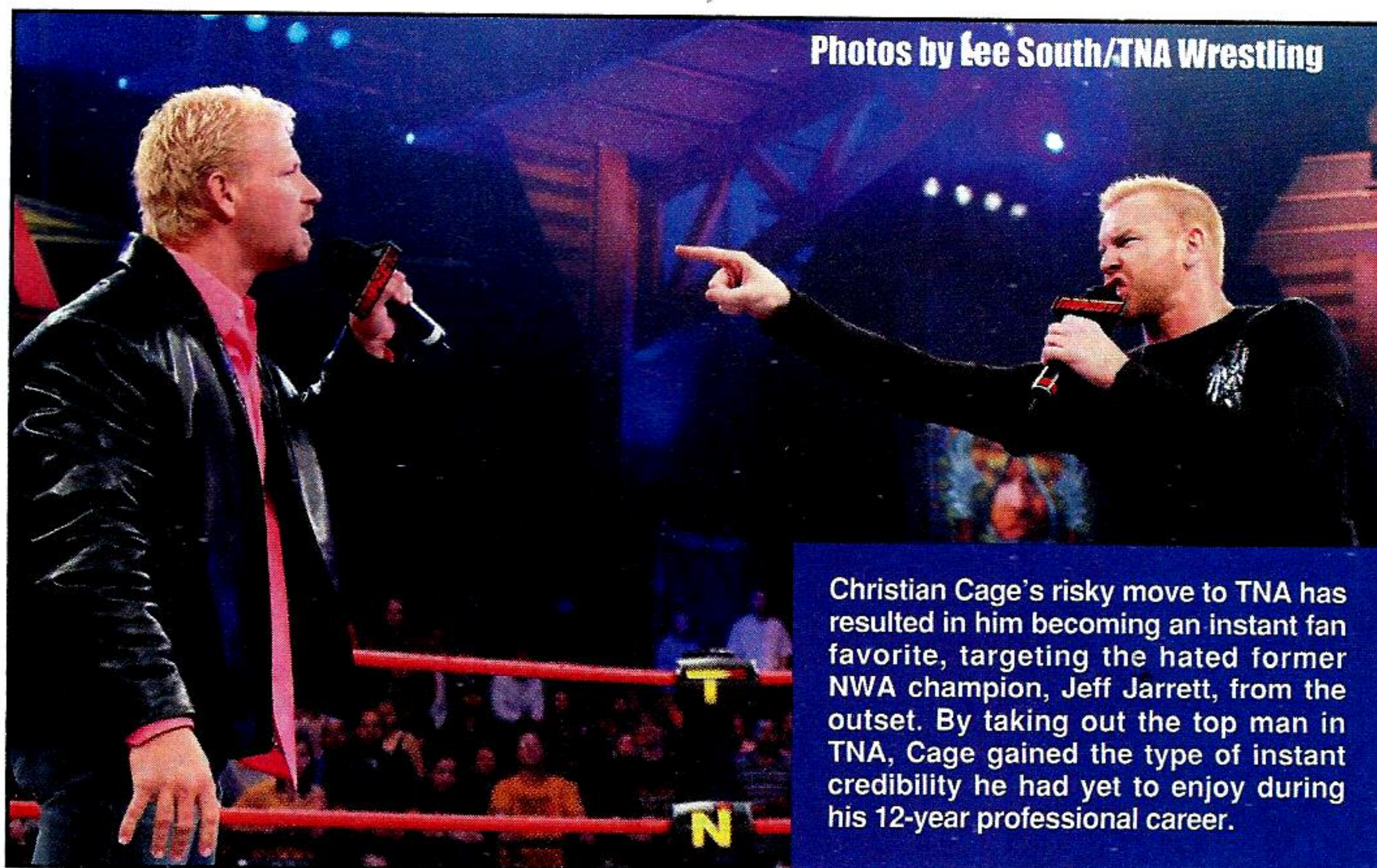
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press conference...



Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Christian Cage's risky move to TNA has resulted in him becoming an instant fan favorite, targeting the hated former NWA champion, Jeff Jarrett, from the outset. By taking out the top man in TNA, Cage gained the type of instant credibility he had yet to enjoy during his 12-year professional career.

CHRISTIAN CAGE

THE FIRST WELL-ESTABLISHED WWE superstar to defect to TNA, Jay Reso (better known as Christian Cage) has become the Nashville-based promotion's torchbearer. A mid-card heel for much of his WWE run, Cage, at 32, is in his wrestling prime. He has become an immensely popular fan favorite in TNA and has filmed segments to promote other Spike TV programs—a sure sign he's being counted on to become a familiar face to even casual viewers.

When Cage defeated Jeff Jarrett for the NWA title on February 12 at the *Against All Odds* pay-per-view event, his fans hit the ring in impromptu celebration, lifting the new champion onto their collective shoulders. Since then, Cage downed challenger Jarrett at TNA's first-ever house show to retain the title. He has also turned back the challenge of Jarrett's reluctant ally, "The Alpha Male" Monty Brown.

As a result, the talented Cage has become a marked man. An increasingly desperate "Army," led by Jarrett, has tried various tactics to try to psych out the champ. In the creepiest episode to date, Jarrett's lackey, Alex Shelley, accompanied by manager James Mitchell, started to follow around Cage's wife, Denise, with his now-infamous video camera.

What's next? Assuming Jarrett himself is unable to win back the belt he considers his personal property, Cage is likely to face an onslaught from other TNA heels.

But Cage is nothing if not self-confident. The Orangeville, Ontario, native recently spoke with *PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED* Managing Editor Frank Ingiosi, Senior Writer Frank Krewda, and Contributing Writer Bill Meltzer. Cage discussed his move to TNA, his prospects for a lengthy title reign, and his intention to lead the promotion to become an even bigger rival to WWE.

FRANK INGIOSI: First of all, Christian, belated congratulations on your NWA title win. I'm sure you're still on cloud nine even now.

CHRISTIAN CAGE: Thanks, Frank. This is something I've been dreaming about for 12 years, ever since my first match. I've held some prestigious titles before. I'm not gonna knock my Intercontinental title reigns in WWE, because there's a strong history behind that belt. But there's nothing—nothing—that compares to the NWA World championship. It took me thousands of matches to get here. So obviously, I'm thrilled.

I've worked too hard and made too many sacrifices over the years to get where I am. I'm not going to give that up. I want to take on a variety of challengers from a variety of styles. Big guys, little guys, brawlers, aerialists. Bring 'em all on.

At the same time, I've been around long enough to know the time to celebrate the win ended as soon I had my first title defense. That's a sure way to end up an ex-champ real quick or get hurt and end up on the sidelines. That's not how this champ rolls, ya know?

BILL MELTZER: I'm amazed by how over you've become with the fans, basically since day one in TNA. You've always had a loyal cult following, but you were one of the heels peo-

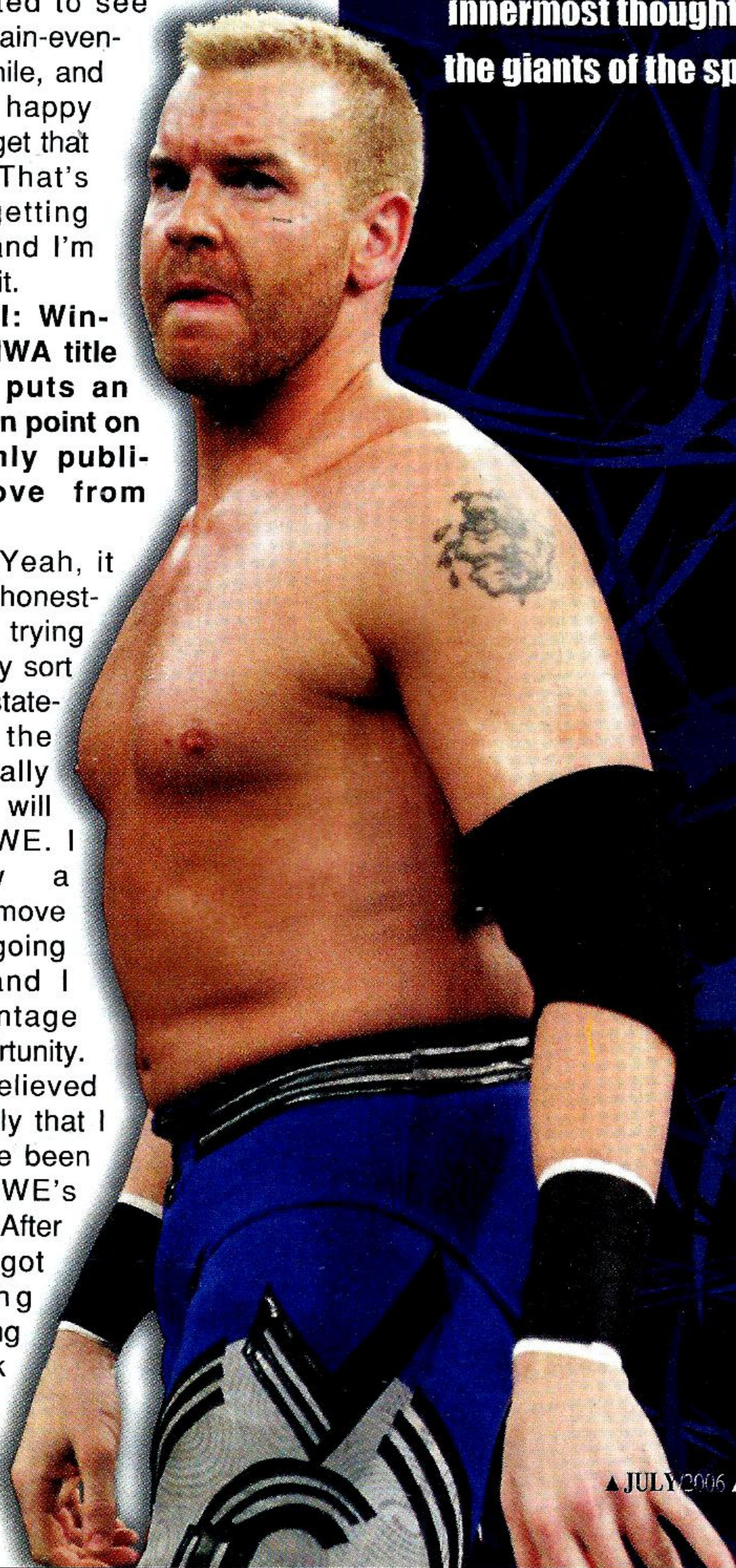
ple loved to hate. It's been a different story here. Why?

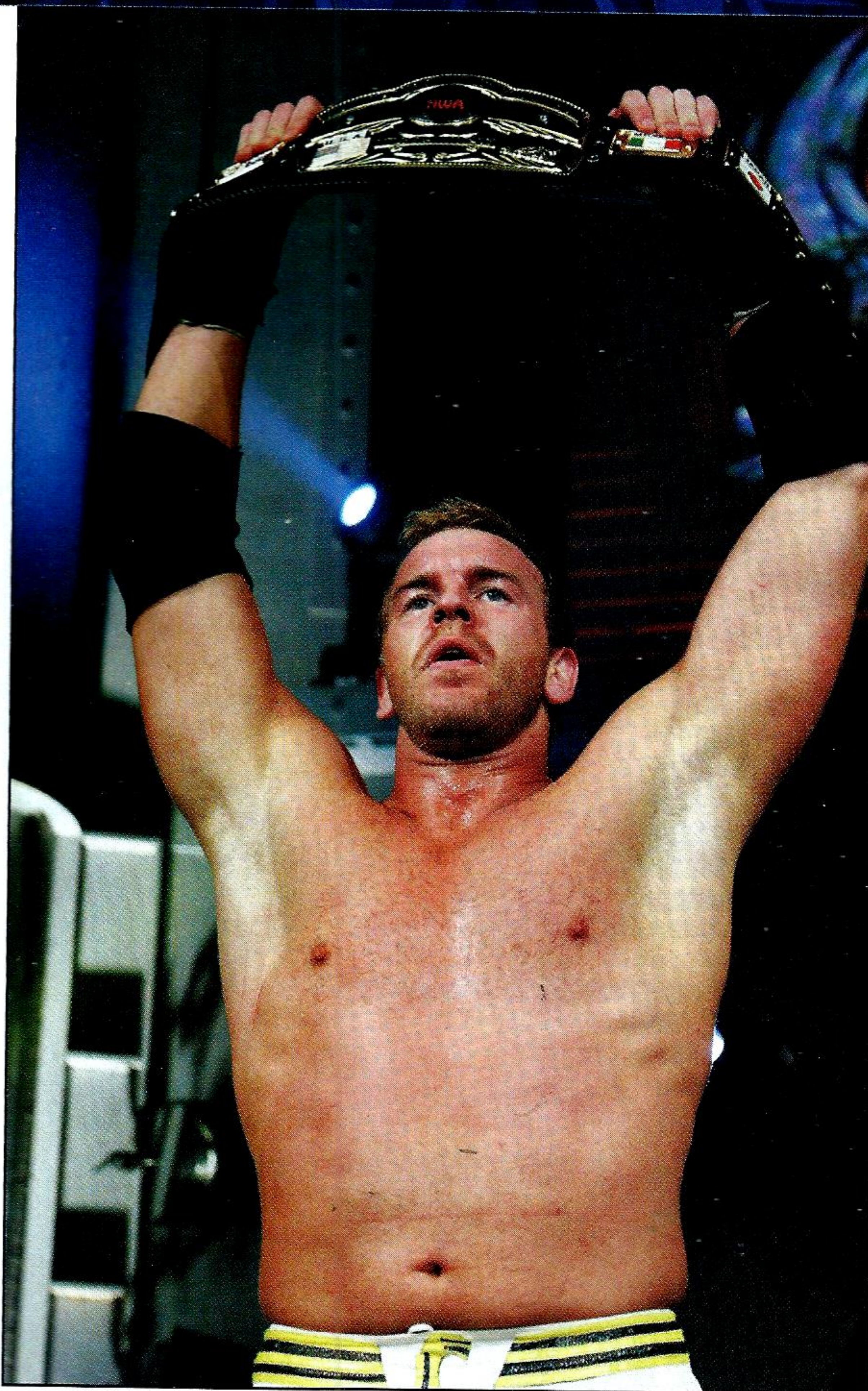
CAGE: It's not TNA's doing and it's not my doing, really. It's my peeps—the fans. You can't fool the fans. To get over in wrestling, you have to be yourself and then kind of amplify your natural personality. Nowadays, the fans decide if you're gonna be a heel or a hero. If they want to cheer you, they will. If they don't like you, no matter how heavily the promotion tries to push you, they're not going to buy into it. I'm really no different now than I was before. I think fans have wanted to see me as a main-eventer for a while, and they were happy to see me get that chance. That's why I'm getting cheered, and I'm grateful for it.

INGIOSI: Winning the NWA title certainly puts an exclamation point on your highly publicized move from WWE.

CAGE: Yeah, it does. But, honestly, I wasn't trying to make any sort of political statement with the move. I really have no ill will toward WWE. I just saw a chance to move ahead by going to TNA, and I took advantage of the opportunity. I always believed very strongly that I should have been one of WWE's main guys. After a while, it got frustrating always being on the brink of a break-

Every issue, reporters from PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED will participate in an incisive press conference with a top wrestling star. The questions will be demanding. And the answers will reveal the innermost thoughts of the giants of the sport.





After years of being mired in the mid-card, Cage believes TNA has provided him with the opportunity to thrive in the main-event spotlight. His NWA title victory over Jarrett solidified Cage's spot as a top man in TNA and the face of the promotion for the foreseeable future.

through, without having a chance to take that final step. But that frustration only really came at the very end. Leaving to come here was a very tough decision.

FRANK KREWDA: Even if it wasn't your intention, you've become the poster child for under-used WWE talent making it big somewhere else. That's

gotta ruffle some feathers in Connecticut.

CAGE: If it does, fine. TNA is a fantastic promotion, the best alternative to WWE that's out there. And, yes, Christian Cage is a big reason why. It's been a perfect fit for me here. The *Impact* tapings are done in Orlando, which is within driving distance of my home. The TNA organi-

zation has treated me first-class all the way, and I've never been happier or wrestled better than I am now.

MELTZER: Christian, it's obvious that TNA has a lot of its hopes riding on you as champion. I don't think it's coincidental that right after you won the belt, you were asked to promote other Spike TV programs and plug *Impact's* move from late Saturday nights to Thursdays.

CAGE: I'm loving every minute of it. Has "Captain Charisma" ever been someone to be camera shy?

MELTZER: Hardly. But aren't you afraid it could be a distraction?

CAGE: Nope. That's just a chance to bring out other sides of my personality. When it comes time to wrestle, I'm all business out there. I have all the motivation in the world to keep my mind focused where it needs to be.

KREWDA: But you've got to admit there's a danger of being caught off-guard. Jeff Jarrett and his so-called "Army" are clearly gunning for you.

CAGE: That's only to be expected. First of all, there's always a lineup of wrestlers ready to go after the champ. Second, Jarrett is scared his precious title is never coming back to him. And he's got every reason to be scared. I've taken Jarrett's best shot. I've taken Monty Brown's best shot. They're already getting desperate, which is why they're pulling crap like that stunt to have Shelley stalk my wife around with that camera. The more they annoy me, the worse it'll be for them. I'll take on whoever wants a piece of me, and they'll all end up "Unprettied."

INGIOSI: How about Samoa Joe?

CAGE: Yeah, Samoa Joe, too. Actually, he's someone I'd really love to take on, because he's got such a complete repertoire of submission moves, and he's so unorthodox. That'd be great challenge.

KREWDA: What has the backstage reaction been to you winning the belt?



Per the instruction of their leader, Jarrett's lackeys aim to hold Christian Cage down, preventing him from further domination in TNA. While the likes of Monty Brown, once Jarrett's right-hand man (above), offered Cage some tough competition, the champion refuses to avoid a fight, regardless of the stakes (right).

CAGE: That's tough to answer. I think everyone but Jarrett and his stooges are pretty happy for me. At the same time, I'm where they all want to be. It's only natural for the guys backstage to look at the champ and think, *That should be me with the belt.*

INGIOSI: Have you heard from Edge or any of other old WWE friends since winning the belt?

CAGE: Edge and I are still close friends. That doesn't change because we now work for different employers. What gets



said between friends is private. Let's leave it at that.

MELTZER: Do you still keep an eye on what happens in WWE?

CAGE: To some extent, I think you have to. But I never make a specific point of checking out what they're up to. You find out anyway. I don't dwell on what they're doing. We've got something pretty special going on in TNA right now, and I'm right in the center of it.

KREWDA: What are your long-term plans in TNA?

CAGE: Well, obviously, to keep the NWA title for a long time. As TNA continues to grow and expand its horizons to house shows and on Spike, I wanna be the focal point. I've worked too hard and made too many sacrifices over the years to get where I am. I'm not going to give that up. I want to take on a variety of challengers with a variety of styles. Big guys,

little guys, brawlers, aerialists. Bring 'em all on. Eventually, if it's in the cards, I'd also love to defend my NWA belt against the X division champion, just for the challenge. For that to work, I'd have to adjust my style a little bit to prepare for more of a shoot, submission style match, but it'd be fun and exciting.

INGIOSI: Those are some pretty ambitious goals. Usually, wrestlers spout clichés about taking things one match at a time.

CAGE: I'm an ambitious guy. There's plenty of great talent on the roster here, but now that I've realized my dream, I'm not about to give it up. That's how I roll. □

PWI'S STATE OF THE GAME ADDRESS

THE PAST YEAR has, in many ways, been one of transition for professional wrestling. WWE returned to the USA Network and NBC. TNA found a steady national outlet for its *Impact* program in Spike TV and is quietly trying to put itself in a position to challenge WWE's virtual monopoly in North America. Raw is still the industry standard. Smackdown consistently features excellent wrestling, yet remains the forgotten WWE brand. TNA also features superb wrestling, yet hasn't found a way to turn a profit.

You could re-read last year's "State Of The Game" and basically reach the same conclusions. So why read the next 46 pages? Well, because there really is no such thing as same old, same old when examining any business as complex as this. And this comprehensive report, produced through the combined efforts of seasoned reporters Dave Lenker, Harry Burkett, Will Welsh, Dan Murphy, and Mike Spillane, allows us to closely examine several key aspects of the sport in context to one other.

Our overall assessment is that the industry has to be thrilled to remain successful at a time when mainstream interest in the sport is not what it was just a few years ago. When WCW and ECW were absorbed by WWE five years ago, many industry analysts wondered if the environment would ever be conducive to creating a real rival for WWE (we'll

discount Raw vs. Smackdown for obvious reasons). Upon its formation four years ago, few took TNA very seriously, but with a prime time TV slot very much a live hope for the coming year, that's beginning to change.

Though declining to acknowledge TNA publicly, WWE has to know that this is the best kind of competitor: TNA doesn't have the funding to seriously damage WWE, but its very presence will inspire WWE creatively, as WCW and ECW did during the height of the Monday Night War of the late-1990s.

While a pending mini-war between WWE and TNA is the hope of every fan (and every wrestler outside of perhaps Triple-H), "The State Of The Game" goes a lot deeper. We examine the State of Independent Wrestling, the State of International Wrestling, the State of the Stars, the State of the Art, the State of the Business, and, finally, the State of the Future.

Ah, the State of the Future ... If you gave each of our reporters his own crystal ball, each would no doubt see an entirely different image in the glass. But one thing they would all agree on: The outlook is anything but the same old, same old. There is more reason for optimism right now than there's been for half a decade. Hopefully, we can say the same thing at this time next year.

STATE OF RAW

For all its perceived faults, Raw is still the state of the industry. Every step the brand takes creates ripples throughout the business. Yet, to maintain its very favorable Monday night Nielsen ratings, the brand must continue to evolve and develop its younger talent



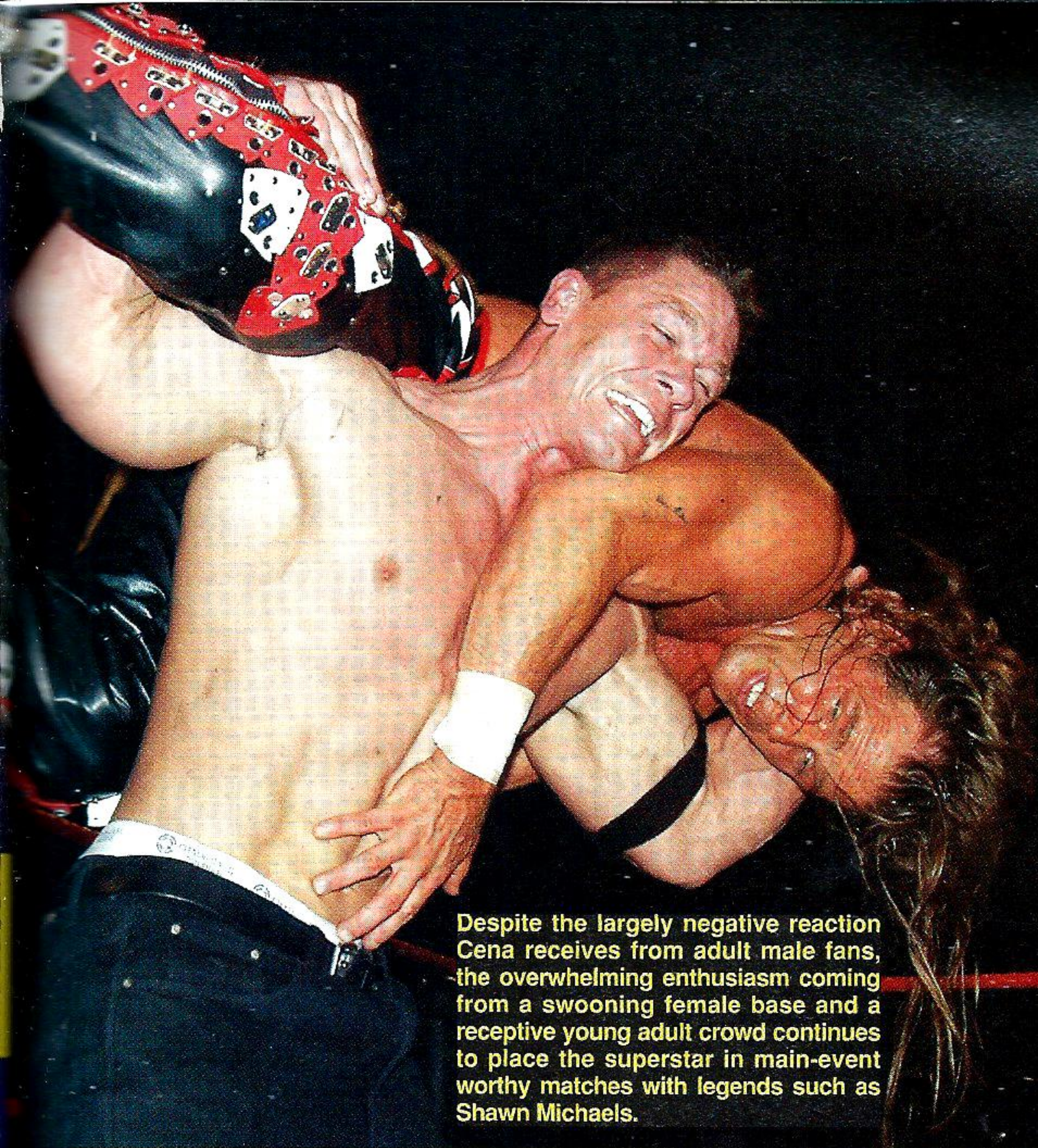
When the big stars who made their names in WWE, like Mick Foley, return for guest appearances, they are big draws, selling increased amounts of both tickets and merchandise.

THERE'S A LITTLE secret that WWE has perpetually tried to shield us from over the past seven years. It's a secret that WWE knows exists—and, in many ways, broadcasts. Yet for some WWE executives and an awful lot of its performers, it's a topic that they're not comfortable discussing. When the topic is brought up during interviews, most WWE employees try to either sidestep the line of questioning or just outright deny that the secret exists. When the secret is identified in the media, WWE turns a blind eye to the report (as it does to most everything else the wrestling media reports) and pretends that it has never been discussed.

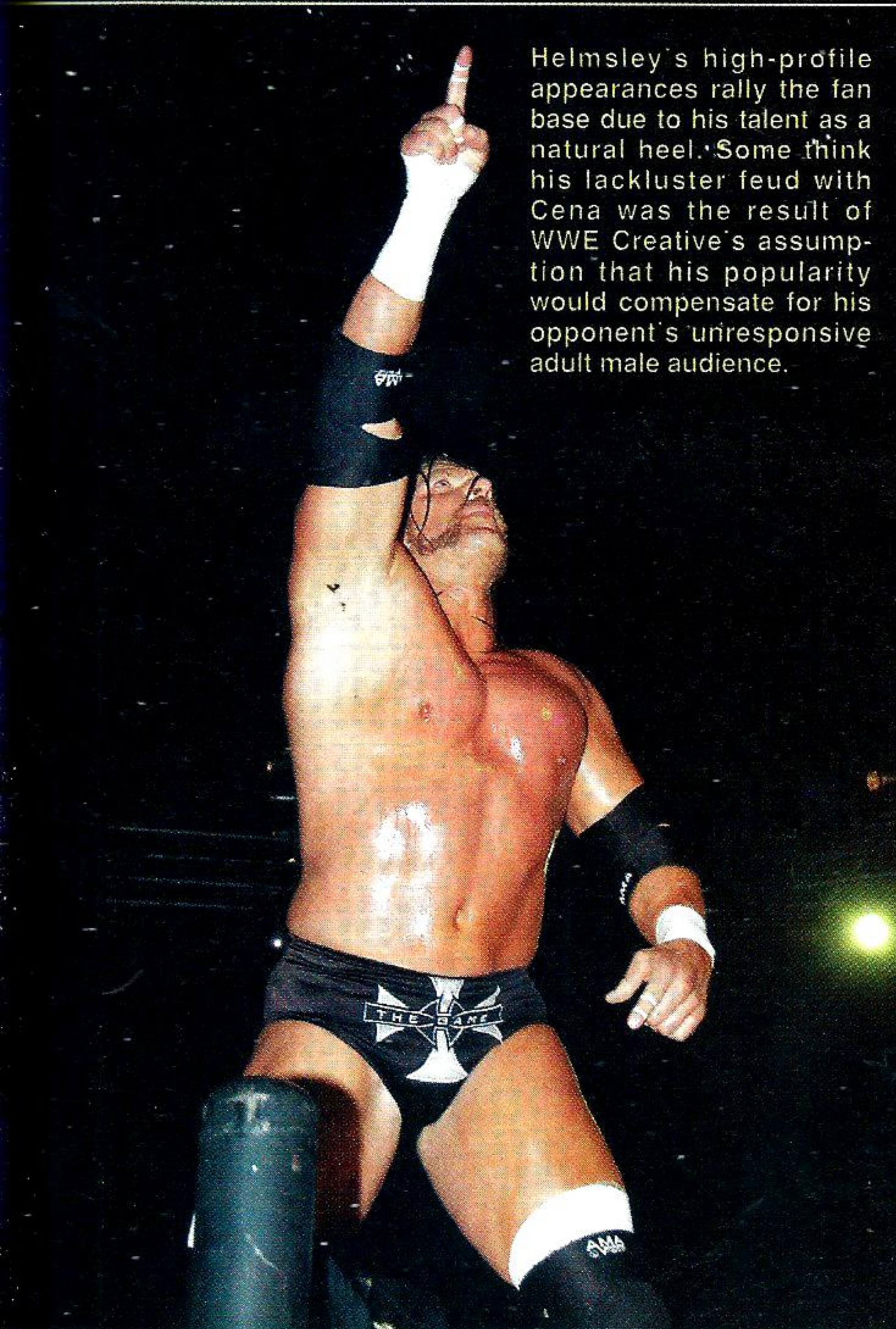
Yet, the secret (which really isn't so much of a secret anymore) exists, and if WWE's recent history holds true, it's going to continue to exist for the foreseeable future. WWE might not pride itself on this secret, but it certainly does run its business and its brands as if this secret is paramount to the company's overall success.

What is this secret? It's a simple one, really: WWE favors Raw over Smackdown.

No, it's not really much of a revelation to those who have followed WWE closely over the past seven years, going back to April 1999 when *Smackdown* first made its debut as a one-time-only special featuring Steve Austin and The Rock against Triple-H and Shane McMahon. Since that time, Raw has been coddled and preened over. It always seems to get first dibs at all the main stars, including returning stars



Despite the largely negative reaction Cena receives from adult male fans, the overwhelming enthusiasm coming from a swooning female base and a receptive young adult crowd continues to place the superstar in main-event worthy matches with legends such as Shawn Michaels.



Helmsley's high-profile appearances rally the fan base due to his talent as a natural heel. Some think his lackluster feud with Cena was the result of WWE Creative's assumption that his popularity would compensate for his opponent's unresponsive adult male audience.

such as Mick Foley, Austin, and The Rock whenever they deem their schedules clear enough to fit a little wrestling in their bill. Triple-H, the promotion's most consistent top-tier performer, has never wavered from his allegiance to the Raw brand. There's also been a bit of an attitude that Raw features WWE's number-one announce team, which should be considered a huge slight to both Tazz and Michael Cole, who do just as well as (and sometimes even better than) Raw's announce team on any given night.

So, what does this all mean? Why spend the first four paragraphs of this "State" telling you that it's actually no secret WWE favors Raw over Smackdown? Because it's one of the reasons why the state of Raw is so good.

Case in point: John Cena vs. Batista. When Cena and Batista switched brands last year, with Cena taking the WWE championship to Raw and Batista taking the World championship to Smackdown, many observers and fans

believed the maneuver to be an even swap, champion vs. champion. Each brand would lose a champion, gain a champion, and gain fresh storylines.

If only it were that simple. Despite his waning popularity and the boos heard alongside all those cheers, Cena was easily the more marketable commodity at the time of the transition. He became a star not because of one particular feud, but because his personality captured the imagination of the fans, and they rallied behind him.

Batista, regardless of his success in late-2005 and early-2006, must give a lot of credit to Triple-H for helping make him. Yes, Batista elevated himself during their feud by hitting all the right notes along the way, but if he had been facing someone other than Triple-H, whom the fans love to hate so much, it's questionable how high he would have risen in the eyes of the fans.

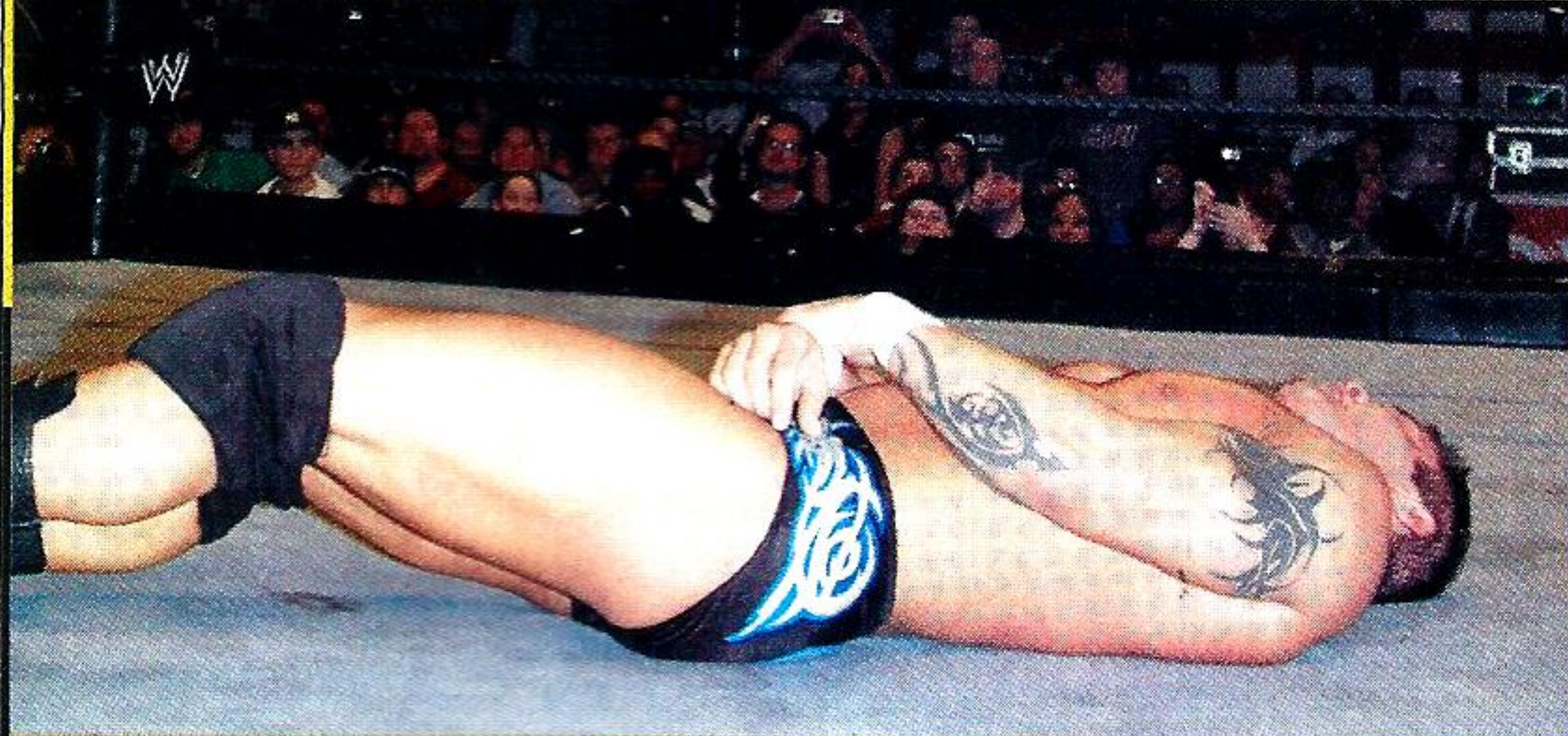
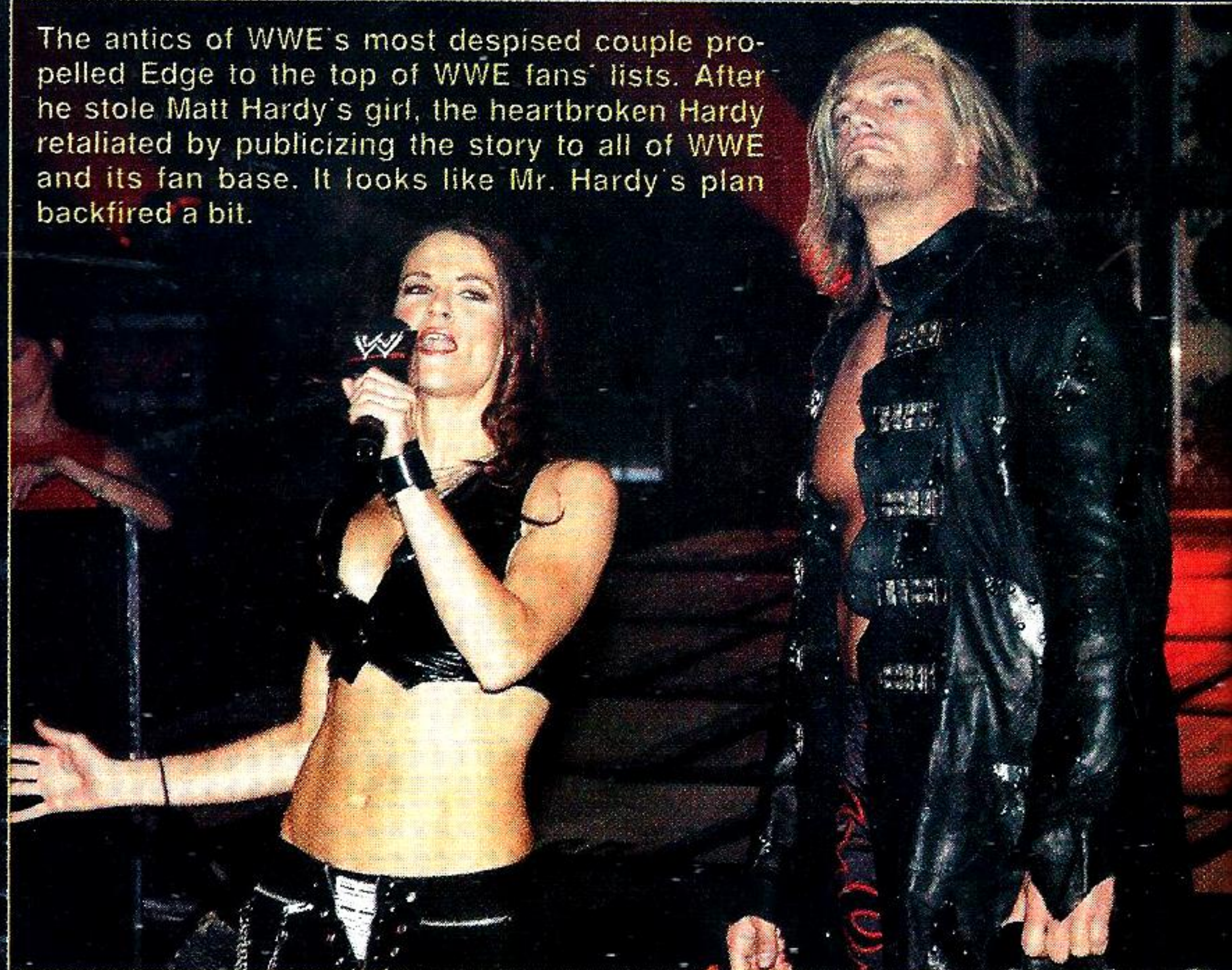
Another aspect that plays to Raw's benefit is that its home is on cable-television. Smackdown wouldn't be able to get away with half the stuff that Raw does on a regular basis—and some of its most risqué storylines, such as Edge and Lita's live sex show, probably wouldn't have gotten past the storyboard stage. But, enough of this comparison between the two.

Raw is doing well—not great, but well—and while some of this is because of its favored position in the eyes of WWE execs, that's not the only



It's a wonder why the new Shawn Michaels, the epitome of morality, hasn't voiced more displeasure to storylines, such as Smackdown's Randy Orton's tasteless attacks on the late Eddie Guerrero.

The antics of WWE's most despised couple propelled Edge to the top of WWE fans' lists. After he stole Matt Hardy's girl, the heartbroken Hardy retaliated by publicizing the story to all of WWE and its fan base. It looks like Mr. Hardy's plan backfired a bit.



building a match around the fact that Cena still hadn't beaten Helmsley, well, maybe it would have been given the respect such a feud deserved.

Cena vs. Helmsley never had the magical appeal that Austin vs. Rock, or Rock vs. Helmsley did, so their feud needed to be given time to develop. Instead, it was forced and rushed, and the promotion's biggest feud heading into WrestleMania felt just a bit washed-out.

reason. A lot of it has to do with the wrestlers within its stable—and not just those within the top tier.

However, when you talk wrestling, that's where you start and, oddly enough, the very top of the top tier could be Raw's weakest link.

No matter how you look at him, whether or not you think he's slowed a step (he has) or his attitude and gimmick has run a little dry (they have), Hunter Hearst Helmsley is still the premier heel in the sport today. He is still the standard that all other heels should compare themselves to, and there's still no one out there who is realistically challenging him for his crown.

Not too many wrestlers, heel or face, can deliver cheers for a fan favorite—any fan favorite—just by standing in the ring with him. Triple-H can.

Now, his feud with John Cena wasn't the most riveting we've seen. Part of that was his fault. However, part of the fault lies with Cena as well as with WWE management for throwing them against one another for the sake of a WrestleMania match. Their chemistry isn't the best that it could be, but if they had time to properly build a feud instead of

Cena, for all of his natural charisma, hadn't been the instant championship success that WWE hoped he'd be. Unfortunately, he's a little bit too goody-goody for a percentage of the male fans to get behind, yet he's also stunningly handsome and well-built, which gets the female fans behind him, which, in turn, drives even more male fans to dislike him.

Got all that?

Cena is undoubtedly talented. Yes, he's not quite up to par in terms of in-ring skill as WWE would like him to be at this point, but so few wrestlers are a complete package when they win a world championship for the first time. Cena needs time to develop further, to perfect his in-ring talents while even sharpening his already prestigious talents behind the microphone. He's young enough that his popularity can waver a little from time to time without scarring him permanently. Even if he doesn't deliver what WWE had hoped from him in the short term, the company should definitely view him as a long-term investment. Barring a trade to Smackdown, he should be one of Raw's cornerstones for years to come.

For as good as they are, Triple-H and Cena can't carry Raw's top tier indefinitely. If Raw is going to continue to succeed and gather ratings at or above the 4.0 watermark, the rest of the wrestlers within the top tier need to continue their development and be ready to step into the spotlight whenever asked.

Edge, WWE's "Rated R Superstar," is undoubtedly ready to assume the position.

Between WrestleMania 21 and 22, three champions carried the Raw banner: Batista, Cena, and Edge. Edge, even though he held a championship for the shortest amount of time of the three, may have had the most impressive run. During his title run, Raw experienced its biggest ratings spike in recent years. Yes, part of that ratings success can, and unfortunately should, be attributed to his racy storyline with Lita, but Edge deserves credit for performing his role well once stepping onto the main event stage.

Edge succeeded as champion because the fans truly hated him, which generated overwhelming fan reactions. Even Triple-H, as hated as he is, connects with a portion of the fan base that admires his brutal, take-no-prisoners style and his commitment to being the champion no matter what underhanded devices he needs to employ.

While we're certain that at least some part of Raw's fan base connected with Edge, most did not. WWE fans saw him as a no-good, lying, girlfriend-stealing, low-brow piece of dirt, and, when he decided to cash in his "money-in-the-bank" stipulation following Cena's Elimination Chamber win at New Year's Revolution, WWE fans also saw him as an opportunist who didn't deserve to wear the championship belt that was around his waist.

All of these are good things, at least for Edge and WWE, anyway.

Prior to Edge becoming champion, WWE had been waiting for him to ascend to the top tier and take his place as one of the sport's premier stars. Unfortunately, whenever Edge would get close, something would stall him. Prior to this year, he was never able to sustain any kind of momentum that could carry him to the main event.

Then came the Lita-Matt Hardy situation, and Edge found all the momentum he needed. And, yes, it's very interesting to note that even though Hardy was the one the fans were behind in that feud, Edge is the one who walked away the victor.



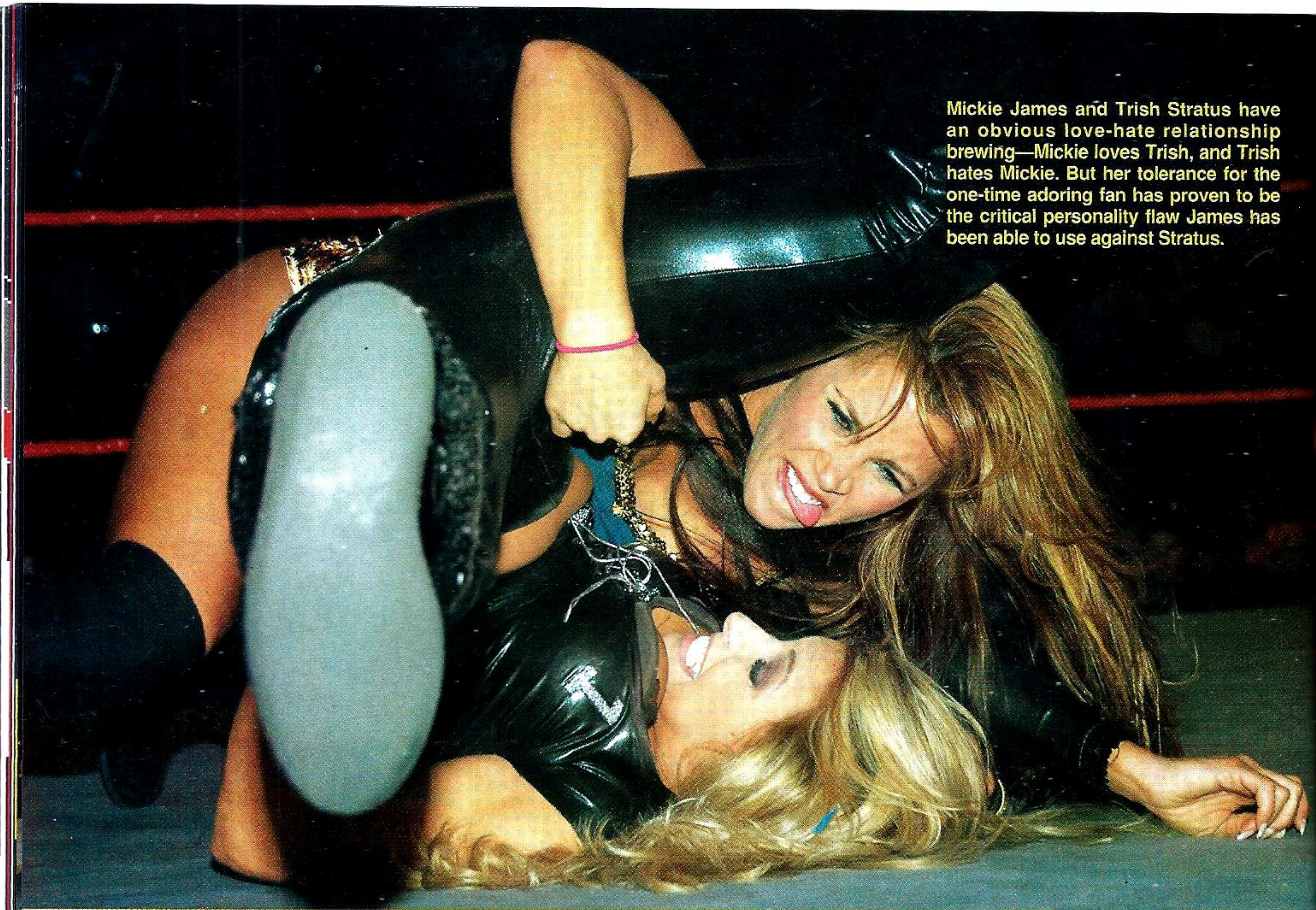
The Big Show's recent turnaround from WWE loser to main-event schmoozer has placed him in a feud with the federation's biggest draws, including its number-one heel, Triple-H.

The quirky, funny Canadian has finally peaked—and Raw should be much better for it.

Speaking of Raw's improvements, how much better has Raw gotten since Shawn Michaels made his return to the ring a full-time commitment? Remember, it wasn't all that long ago that HBK was creeping us out with regular appearances as a guest referee with a penchant for tacky short-shorts and work boots.

From a labeling standpoint: If Triple-H is the consummate professional, Cena is the future, and Edge is the superstar finally finding his stride, then Michaels is the veteran who somehow continues to show them all up on his way to earning honors as Most Valuable Performer.

Yes, his holy-roller gimmick might come off as a bit hypocritical considering his past, and the fact that he's currently wrestling for a company who is using the tragic death of one of its wrestlers for storyline purposes, but there is no denying that Michaels is currently magic in the ring. The man just refuses to allow himself or whoever his opponent happens to be to have a bad performance. He elevates everyone with whom he steps in the ring and, at least for a short time, makes them more valuable to the brand as a whole. If they don't sus-



Mickie James and Trish Stratus have an obvious love-hate relationship brewing—Mickie loves Trish, and Trish hates Mickie. But her tolerance for the one-time adoring fan has proven to be the critical personality flaw James has been able to use against Stratus.

tain that momentum (and not all of his opponents have), that's their fault, not his.

This can't be said about every wrestler, but it can be said about Michaels: He's doing everything within his power to make Raw the best that it can possibly be.

Helmsley, Cena, Edge, and Michaels are the core of Raw's top tier, which is why the brand is positioned so well for the present and the immediate future. Of course, four wrestlers do not a top tier make, no matter how good they are. Luckily for Raw, its top tier is currently as deep as it has been for quite some time.

The Big Show went through a few years where he was seemingly the butt of every wrestling joke being told, but that was a long time ago and the big man is now as valuable as he's ever been. The jokes have stopped, the solid main-event performances have added up, and he is a legitimate threat to win any title he chooses to go after. WWE positions him well by giving him a constant presence but distancing him from the title hunt until it really needs him in there.

Kane is still a top-tier performer for Raw, but it seems as if wrestling fans can only handle his angry, demented persona for short spurts. In order for him to become truly valuable to the promotion and actually succeed at a run for the WWE championship, he's going to have to show that he's more

than a gimmick. Whether he's capable of that or not, we're not sure.

Then there's one last Raw superstar who should be considered as a top-tier performer, and we're so glad (if not a little embarrassed) that our initial thoughts on Chris Masters were so horribly wrong. When Masters first debuted, we'll admit that our initial thoughts weren't kind. He was too muscular, too pretty, too much the model of Vince McMahon's perfect wrestler to be any good. He's now been on Raw for over a year-and-a-half, and he's proven every one of our first impressions wrong. He's a good wrestler, probably better than anyone with so much musculature has any right being. He also has a marketable, likable personality, which is also something you don't expect from someone who obviously spent years in the gym crafting his physique.

In other words, Chris Masters has become one of WWE's most pleasant surprises. If he maintains his momentum, he can survive a year or so teetering between heel and fan favorite and on-the-cusp mid-carder and legitimate main-eventer (as he's seemingly been doing for the greater part of the past six months). He's going to be a force for many years to come.

Yes, right now Raw's top tier is easily its biggest selling point. It's big, it's deep, and there are all kinds



Victoria and the rest of the women of Raw (including poor Ashley Massaro, here) has given the brand an unexpected lift. James' title victory opens up a lot of interesting possibilities for the division.

of room for experimentation within it. WWE executives should be more than pleased with the top-tier roster they've put together for the brand.

The mid-card roster is a little less stable. Of all Raw's mid-card roster, the only standouts are Ric Flair, Rob Van Dam, Carlito, and Shelton Benjamin. Each of these four men can carry a mid-card program blindfolded and keep it entertaining, and they've also proven themselves to be solid enough wrestlers to main-event on occasion. Heck, an argument can be made that Flair should always be considered a main-eventer no matter where he is on the card, and the only reason that RVD is considered a mid-card wrestler at this point is because WWE has forced his circular peg to fit into its square hole.

Outside of those four wrestlers, however, Raw's mid-card suffers a severe drop off. Watching Chavo

Guerrero emulate his uncle Eddie is just creepy at this point, and we're still waiting for Danny Basham, Matt Stryker, Rene Dupree, Rob Conway, Trevor Murdoch, and Lance Cade to show that they're better than their respective gimmicks. Goldust ... well, if you can't say something nice about a person, it's best to say nothing at all. WWE, and Raw in particular, would benefit greatly if one of one these wrestlers stepped up and became a dependable fifth mid-carder.

If that doesn't happen, you could at least consider Raw's women's division, which we criticized in this venue only last year, as that dependable fifth mid-carder. Why our change of heart? Because it's not uncommon for the women of this division to outshine even Raw's main-eventers on a weekly basis. Trish Stratus, despite losing the title to Mickie James, continues to earn her reputation as the best woman in the sport today, and each week she steps in the ring she does something else that will have people calling her the best woman in the sport's history. Her love-hate feud with James has been one of the most entertaining storylines of the year, and their on-air chemistry should be the envy of every wrestler in the sport today.

If you add into the mix Victoria, who keeps wrestling at a high level, plus reflect on the entertainment value that Torrie Wilson, Candice Michelle, Maria, and Ashley Massaro provide, the women's division *actually* stands out as one of the strengths of the Raw brand.

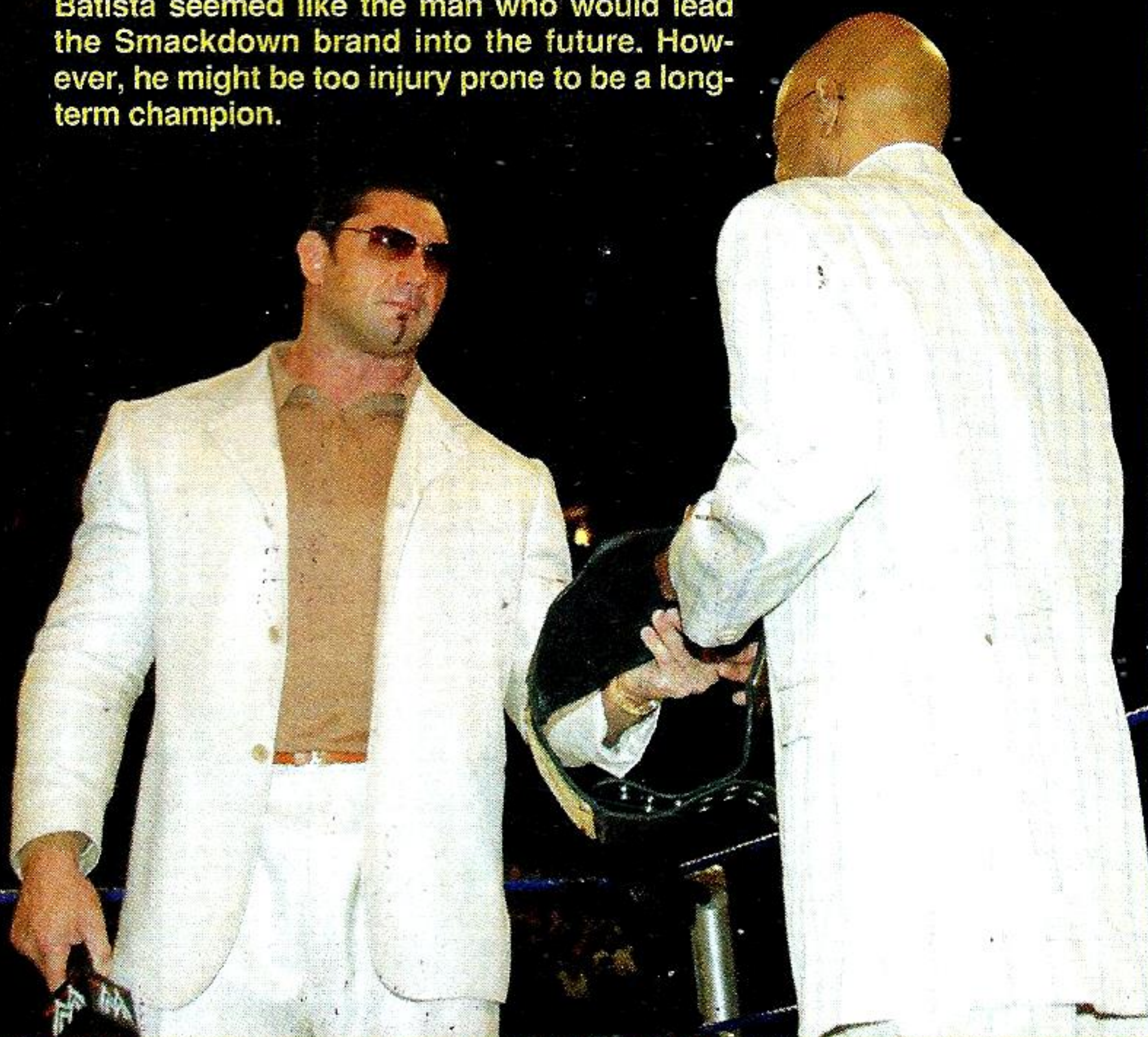
Regardless of its strong points, there is still one major change to be made—WWE could stand to weaken its over-reliance on wrestling nostalgia. While it may prove to be profitable in the short run (who doesn't like seeing a superstar of the 1980s trotted out every now and then?), it essentially does nothing for the long-term sustainability of the brand. In all likelihood, the nostalgia trend is merely a stop-gap for WWE as it desperately scours the developmental and indy circuits to find its next megastar in the making. The fact is, at one point in their respective careers, all of the legends WWE is bringing back became stale to the point of expendability. At the peaks of their careers, many of these wrestlers were sent packing when their earning potential ran dry. Undoubtedly, the novelty will wear off soon, and hopefully Raw will have developed its roster, as well as developmental talent, so well that gimmicks such as the nostalgia trend will no longer be necessary ... at least for a while.

In 2006, Raw will maintain its place at the top of the pantheon of professional wrestling. Its strengths are many, the weaknesses are few, but potentially damaging. Overall, the state of Raw is strong. □

STATE OF SMACK

Yes folks, *Smackdown* is WWE's unacknowledged "B" show. But the "B" doesn't have to stand for bad. If WWE doesn't give this brand the attention it deserves, however, TNA may take *Smackdown*'s place in the current pecking order

A strong champion should be the face of a promotion and provide it with an identity. Batista seemed like the man who would lead the *Smackdown* brand into the future. However, he might be too injury prone to be a long-term champion.



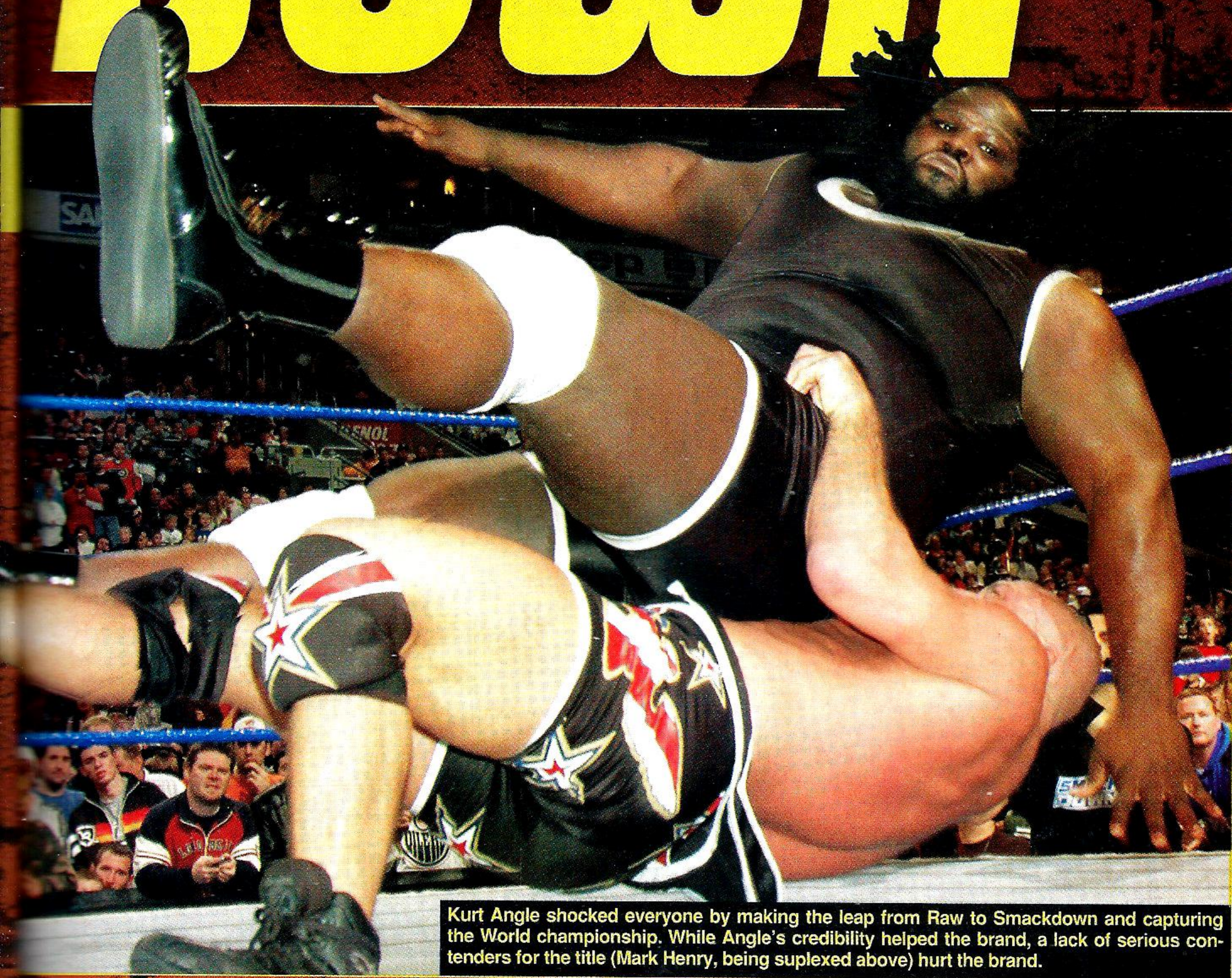
Raw airs live on Monday nights whereas *Smackdown*, which is taped weekly on Tuesdays, occupies the Friday night, 8 p.m. Eastern time slot. Monday night is to pro wrestling what Saturday afternoon is to college football. Monday night is synonymous with rating wars and wrestling shows. Friday night is ratings death for any show. What's more, *Raw* is carried by the USA network, a well-established cable network that has made WWE programming a priority. UPN, a broadcast network, regularly bumps *Smackdown* for other shows, often relegating the show to Saturday night, which is an even tougher night for drawing viewers.

Now, consider this question: Where do returning stars congregate? Mick Foley, Hulk Hogan, and Steve Austin all come to *Raw* to pop pay-per-view buys and weekly TV ratings. Why? Because they know they'll get more exposure on *Raw* than they would on *Smackdown*. Even the McMahons, when they feel like exerting their control (which is fairly regularly), show up on *Raw*. Why associate with an "inferior" product? They know which show fans recognize as the WWE flagship.

Raw's agenda almost always gets top billing. McMahon's depletion of the *Smackdown* roster for the benefit of *Raw*'s—vis-à-vis the draft lottery—speaks volumes about where WWE's priorities are.

IT'S DIFFICULT TO discuss *Smackdown*'s perceived decline without talking about *Raw*. Sure, they're two separate brands—or so we're led to believe—but their fates are so closely linked, that what happens on one show is bound to affect the other. Last year, WWE honchos seemingly made a conscious effort to push the *Raw* brand. Naturally, Vince McMahon would deny this. But don't take our word for it. Just ponder some of the current "realities" surrounding the *Smackdown* brand.

Down



Kurt Angle shocked everyone by making the leap from Raw to Smackdown and capturing the World championship. While Angle's credibility helped the brand, a lack of serious contenders for the title (Mark Henry, being suplexed above) hurt the brand.

Last year, Smackdown sent its most marketable star (John Cena), its most talented performer (Kurt Angle), and its hottest Latino prospect (Carlito) to Raw. Sure, Smackdown received some wrestlers in return, but one look at the current composition of the Smackdown roster tells you all you need to know about who got the better of the exchange.

From a business perspective, it appears that WWE has leveraged its financial well-being with the "red brand" as well. WWE profits might have been up compared to last quarter and last year, but that was due mainly to the company's emergence into several foreign markets. The fact is, the Smackdown brand had little to do with the company's upsurge, despite

the fact that the program did a 3.1 average rating last quarter. But it hasn't posted back-to-back 3.0 (or better) shows since August-September 2005. Even more discouraging has been Smackdown's pay-per-view performance. While buys are up overall, some of the brand's most recent events rank among the worst ever in company history. And, unless Smackdown shows it's capable of creating some new young stars, merchandising revenue is likely to stagnate.

Additionally, a lack of new blood at the main-event level has forced the brand to repackage old storylines in a manner that makes the programming seem repetitive. Smackdown's recent downward spiral can actually be traced back several years and stems directly from the brand's world championship picture. John Bradshaw Layfield, Rey Misterio Jr., and the late Eddie Guerrero were all effective wrestlers, but somehow didn't cut it as champions. JBL had the bearing and personality of a credible champion, but his physical limitations in the ring eroded his credibility. Eddie, a career underdog and undersized contender, had the goods on the mat. Unfortunately, he lacked the commanding presence of a legit world titleholder. And part of what makes new champion Rey Misterio Jr. so appealing is his affinity for getting the crap knocked out of him but hanging in there against bigger, tougher opponents. Misterio has certainly worked hard enough to earn a world championship, but how seriously can WWE expect the fans to take a world champ whose closer in height to Sky Low Low than Hulk Hogan?

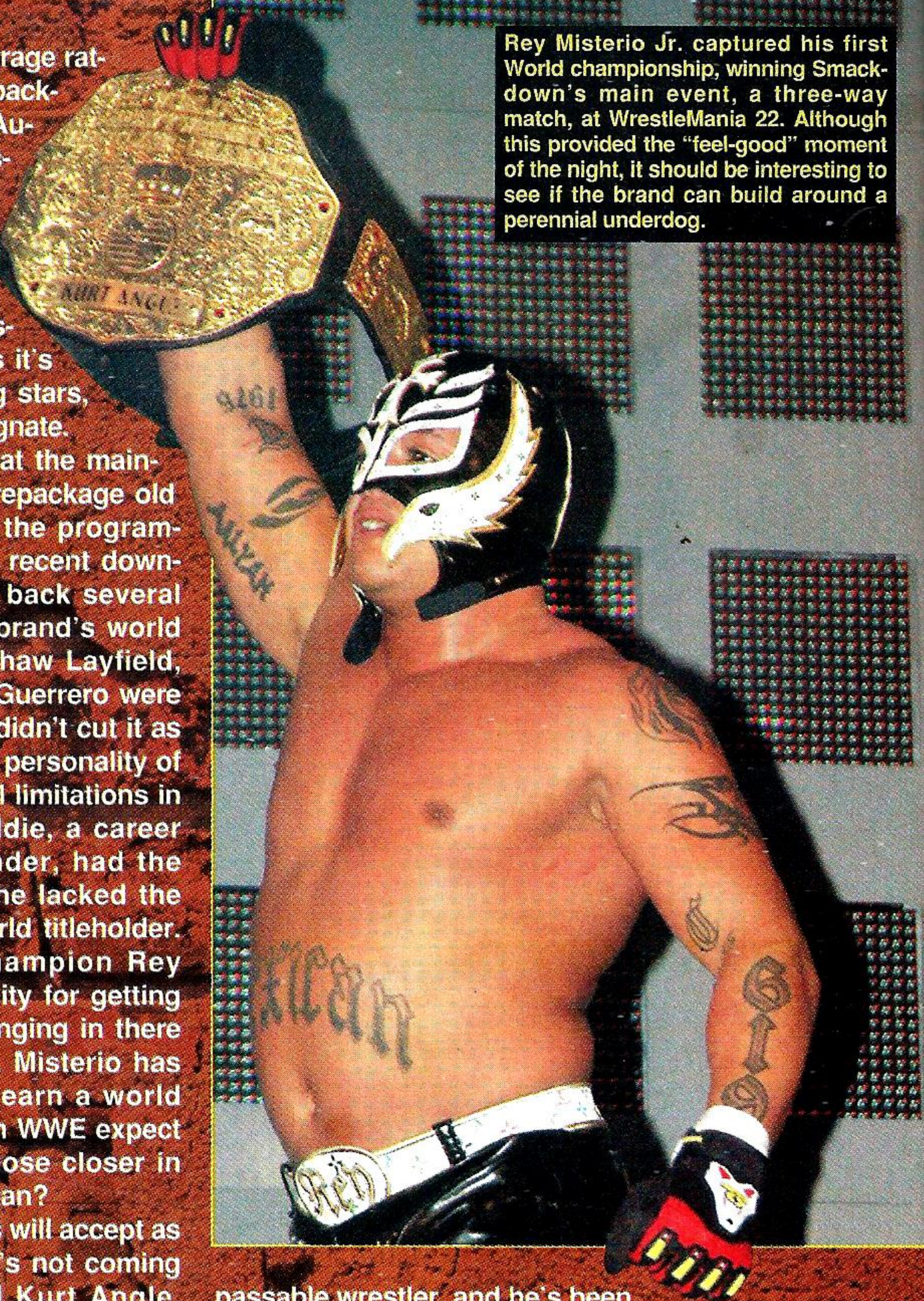
It seems the only wrestlers the fans will accept as champion are Brock Lesnar (and he's not coming back anytime soon), Batista, and Kurt Angle. Currently, Lesnar is on Vince McMahon's least wanted list and Batista has demonstrated an inability to stay healthy. That leaves Angle as the obvious choice for champion. But, as Angle gets older, it will become impossible for him to maintain the intensity and punish his body as he customarily does. This lack of depth at the top is perhaps the biggest problem facing Smackdown. It seems no matter who is crowned World champion, the brand's universe of legitimate contenders is limited.

Consider for a moment the wrestlers who comprise Smackdown's upper echelon of potential title contenders these days. The Undertaker is credible enough, but he's aging before our eyes and works a limited schedule. The spirit seems willing, but the body may no longer be able to carry a brand. Mark Henry has spent the past decade making sporadic appearances as WWE's resident strongman. However, he's done little to establish himself as a

passable wrestler, and he's been even less successful positioning himself as a potential champ. Fans will always watch in slack-jawed awe as Henry performs majestic feats of strength, but cringe when he attempts a high-impact wrestling maneuver. They certainly won't pay to watch him wrestle for the title. Bobby Lashley, an up-and-coming superstar with boatloads of potential, is not at a point where he can be relied on to be the face of the brand. Not yet, at least.

Randy Orton, for all his promise, has been somewhat exposed on *Smackdown*, where he's run out of legends to "kill." Mick Foley, Shawn Michaels, and 'Taker are all accomplished pros, capable of protecting and grooming Orton as he matures. Add Triple-H to that list. Problem is, only The Undertaker currently wrestles on Smackdown, and their feud has already run its course. That seems to be the sentiment for all potential main-event matchups. No matter who pairs off, it seems we've likely seen it before.

Rey Misterio Jr. captured his first World championship, winning Smackdown's main event, a three-way match, at WrestleMania 22. Although this provided the "feel-good" moment of the night, it should be interesting to see if the brand can build around a perennial underdog.



Unfortunately, Smackdown isn't much deeper at the mid-card level. JBL, a former WWE champion and current (as of press time) U.S. titleholder, brings a lot of clout with him from the upper deck. Plus, he seems more comfortable and appropriate defending the U.S. title, which is a second-tier title. Chris Benoit, a former World and U.S. champion, brings just as much juice to the Smackdown mid-card. It seems as though Benoit has spent his entire career proving that he belongs at the top of any card, despite his smallish size and vanilla personality. Apparently, most of the Smackdown brain trust missed Benoit's career, as it seems he's lodged firmly

below the glass ceiling yet again.

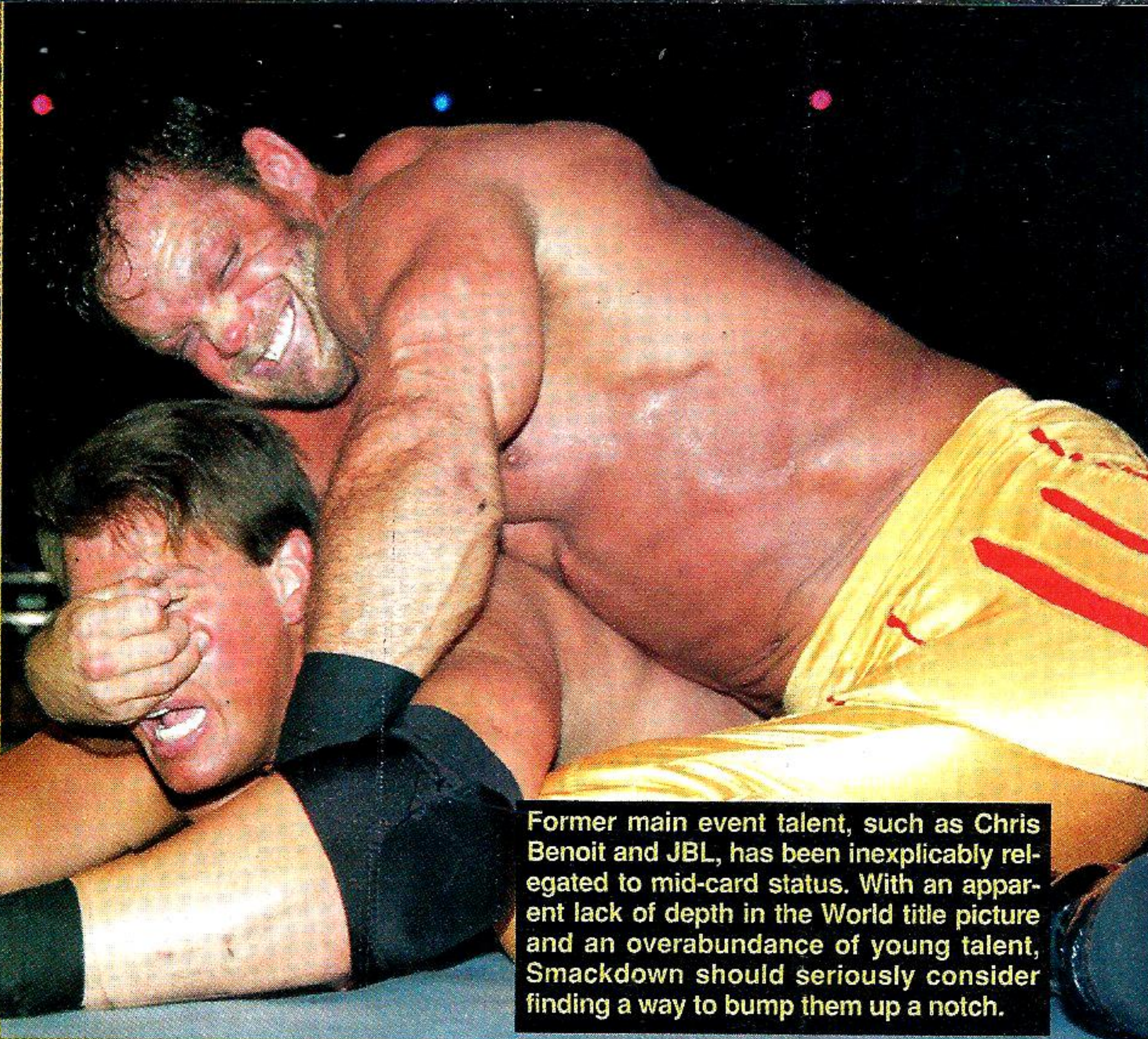
After those two, there's a significant dropoff. Booker T is still a capable wrestler with an entertaining persona. Trouble is, he talks more and more about retiring with each passing week. Is he interested in getting to another main event or simply playing out the string? Finlay is another tough-as-nails contender who complements Benoit and JBL in the ring. He's also well-respected by his co-workers. But when fans think of Finlay, they think of a WCW retread—the former hardcore champ who reached the end of the line more than five years ago. Who can blame them? That's the last time they saw him competing in the ring.

The versatile Matt Hardy will always be celebrated as an exciting steward of wrestling's future. However, being saddled by a

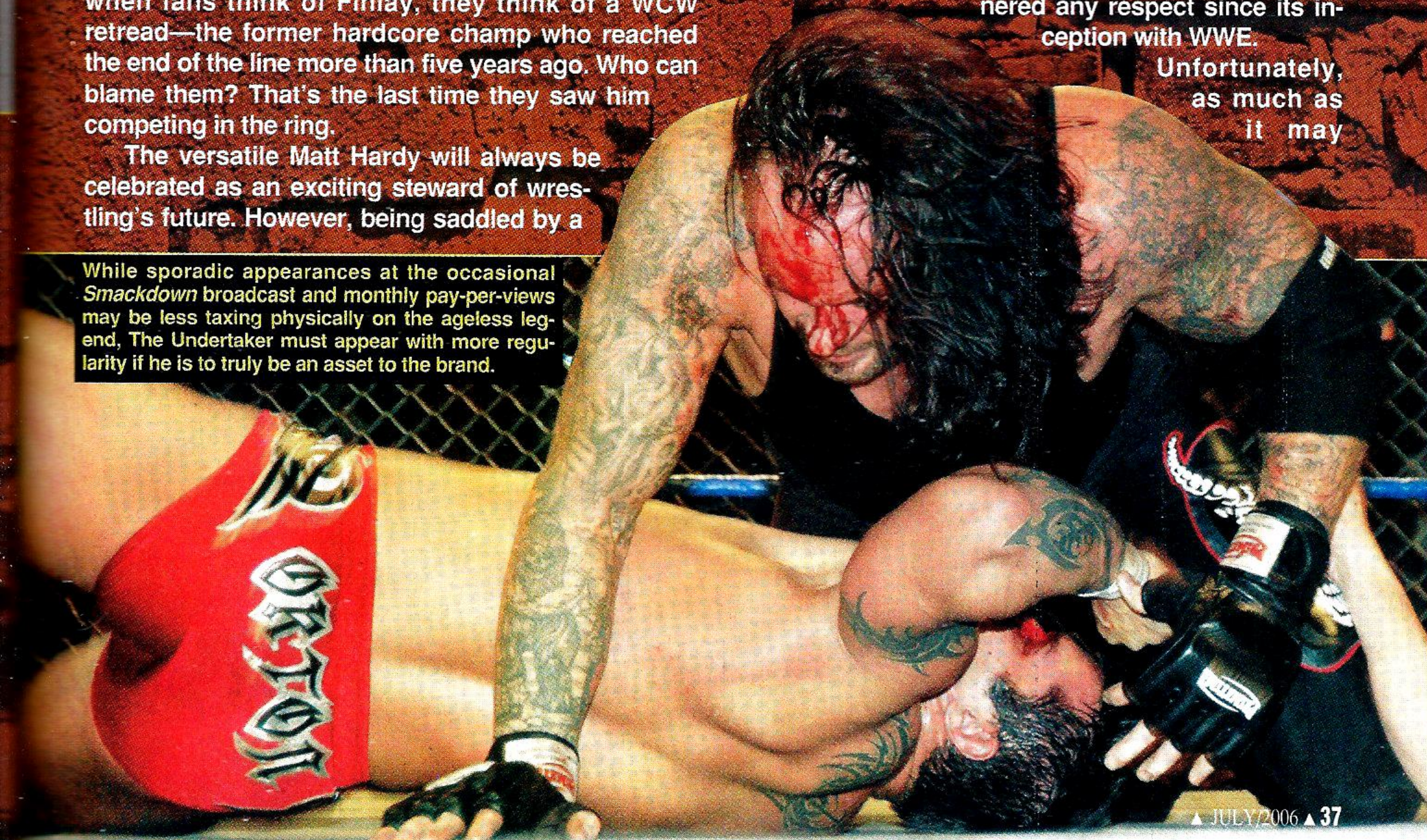
confusing program with an aging Road Warrior Animal won't exactly help Matt showcase his skills. Plus, it's hard to imagine WWE topping the real-life angle they used when Lita allegedly cheated on Matt with Edge. Unfortunately, that might have been as big as Matt Hardy will get in WWE. As for the cruiserweights, Gregory Helms, Kid Kash, Jamie Noble, and Funaki are all talented, versatile, and exciting prospects, but they are mired in a division that hasn't garnered any respect since its inception with WWE.

Unfortunately, as much as it may

While sporadic appearances at the occasional Smackdown broadcast and monthly pay-per-views may be less taxing physically on the ageless legend, The Undertaker must appear with more regularity if he is to truly be an asset to the brand.



Former main event talent, such as Chris Benoit and JBL, has been inexplicably relegated to mid-card status. With an apparent lack of depth in the World title picture and an overabundance of young talent, Smackdown should seriously consider finding a way to bump them up a notch.



sound like a broken record, the depth is not much better amongst the preliminary talent. Don't let The Boogeyman's WrestleMania appearance fool you. His gimmick is creepy (anyone who eats worms is worth a closer look), and he has an impressive physique. But look at The Boogeyman long enough and his inadequacies become apparent. The same goes for Orlando Jordan and Sylvan Grenier.

The purpose of examining "The State Of Smackdown" is not to bury the brand, but rather identify where it must improve in order to remain competitive in this vicious business. Despite the apparent lack of roster depth and options, there are several things Smackdown can do to improve its show and brand. And with TNA waiting in the wings, the powers that be in WWE might want to devote some time to the "blue brand"—pronto.

First and foremost, Smackdown should promote tag team wrestling. WWE systematically phased tag team wrestling out of the game by devaluing the titles with so many changes. That situation still prevails in the Raw brand, where the ridiculous Spirit Squad unseated Kane and The Big Show one night after their successful title defense at WrestleMania 22. Since regaining the Smackdown

tag straps in late-December 2005, M-

N-M has been relegated to competing in six-man tag matches, as so few fresh teams exist to challenge them for the title.

Yet, Smackdown is chock full of potentially competitive and entertaining tag teams (notice the overabundance of cruiserweights) in addition to established pairs such as the Mexicools and Paul London and Spanky Kendrick. By reintroducing a competitive aspect to the tag team ranks, Smackdown can fill a niche its Monday night counterpart has ignored as of late.

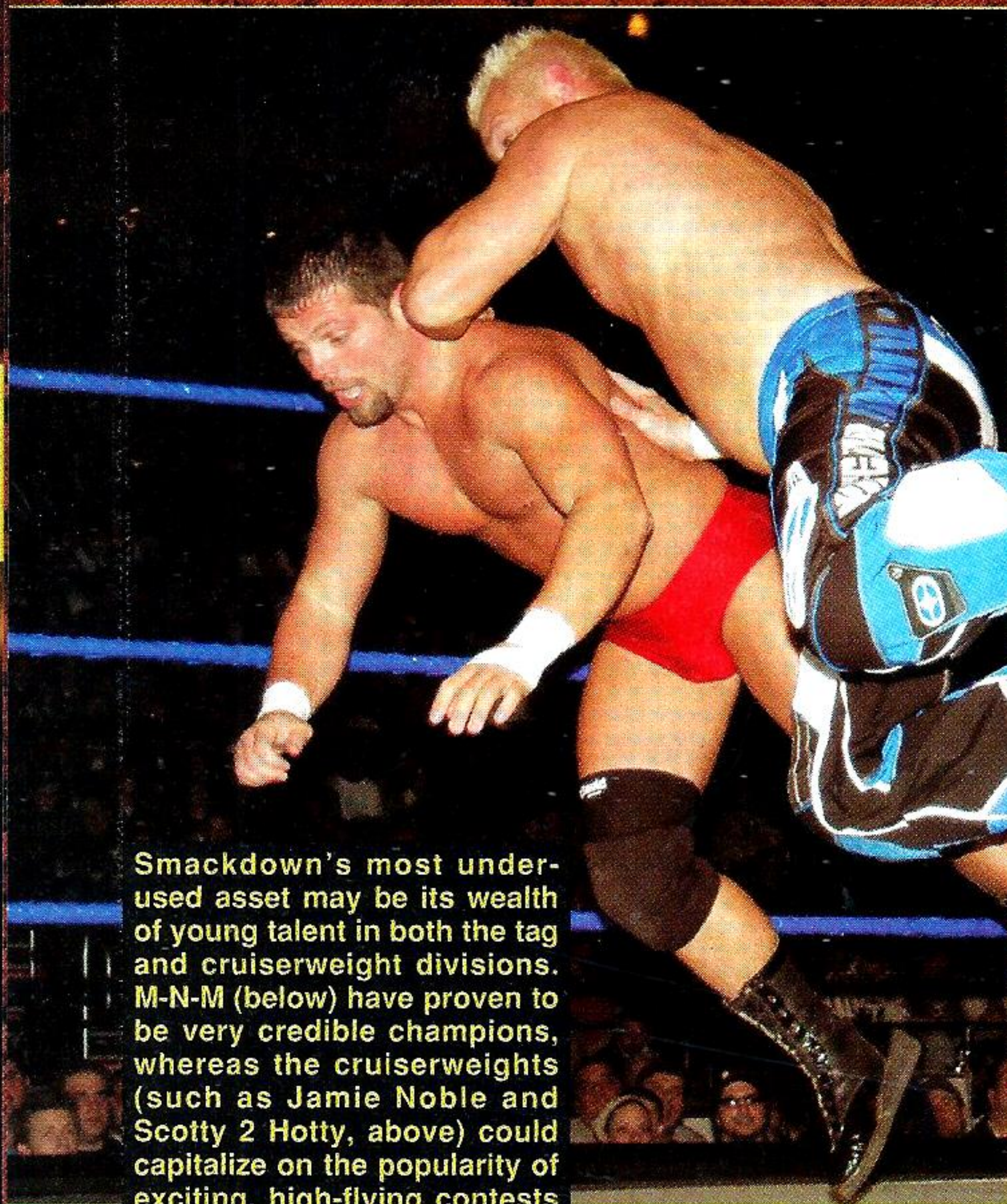
Furthermore, Smackdown could break current trends and allow champions to defend their straps, thereby increasing respect for the titles. As noted above, WWE Creative seemed to go through a phase where it thought it was hip to disrespect titles (remember the ridicu-

lousness that was the hardcore championship?).

Smackdown currently has four titles: World, U.S., cruiserweight, and tag team. By instilling an orderly system for competing and contending for each, Smackdown can give its show a renewed air of competition.

Once upon a time, Smackdown distinguished itself from other shows by stressing in-ring action. WWE has gotten away from that recently and the quality of the show plummeted.

Smackdown's most under-used asset may be its wealth of young talent in both the tag and cruiserweight divisions. M-N-M (below) have proven to be very credible champions, whereas the cruiserweights (such as Jamie Noble and Scotty 2 Hotty, above) could capitalize on the popularity of exciting, high-flying contests that programs such as *Raw* do not offer.



Another tactic WWE Creative could seek to employ would be to broadcast *Smackdown* live. In today's age of instant info, surprising wrestling fans is next to impossible, but having a live show sure helps. The adrenaline and excitement of a live show are contagious and infectious and create interest in the show.

Unfortunately, *Smackdown* faces not only a nasty sibling rivalry with the *Raw* brand, but also the very real possibility that it could fall from its number-two spot despite being part of WWE. A few years ago, Batista, who was competing on *Raw* at the time, kicked up something of a controversy by publicly stating that it was a superior show to *Smackdown*. Naturally, many of those associated with *Smackdown* at the time were rankled by Batista's comments, yet very few stepped up to challenge his initial premise. Fast forward to 2006 and debunking Batista's comments doesn't get any easier. In fact, it gets harder because what was a perception a few years ago has pretty much become a known reality. But the question now shouldn't be "Can *Smackdown* ever catch up to *Raw*?"—the answer being "Not as long as they're both owned by WWE." Instead, the focus should be on staving off new and unconventional threats to the wrestling market. Obviously, Ultimate Fighting and TNA have made a big splash on the Spike network. And while TNA *Impact* may still not be ready for prime time, the current direction of the company indicates that it soon will be, and, when it does, it could give *Smackdown* a run for its money.

Spike TV has already proved it is more committed to wrestling than UPN. The UFC-TNA programming block means much more to Spike than *Smackdown* means to UPN. By all accounts, the show will remain in its Friday time slot when UPN and WB merge as the CW Network this fall.

While *Smackdown* is far from a sinking ship, the current state of this brand can't be considered very encouraging for the following reasons: *Smackdown* is on an unstable

network in a questionable time slot; its pay-per-view and merchandising numbers are down, which suggests that WWE is increasing profits in spite of the brand; WWE continues to take resources (marketable wrestlers, media avenues, etc.) away from the brand; and *Smackdown*, as well as professional wrestling in general, faces increased competition from a variety of new challengers, most notably UFC.

And, of course, there is TNA to consider. While not posing an immediate threat to either WWE brand in an 11 p.m. time slot, it would be *Smackdown*'s status as the sport's number-two federation that would be most at jeopardy if TNA *Impact* were given a prime time slot.

Maybe that's what it would take to convince Vince McMahon to place a greater emphasis on his "B" brand. □

The Boogeyman could draw attention away from his ridiculous gimmick with a splendid array of wrestling ability. Unfortunately, he has yet to do that.



STATE OF TNA

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Since this time in 2005, TNA has secured a cable contract with Spike TV, Christian Cage has gained the NWA championship, and men like Sting and Scott Steiner added significant star-power to the promotion. The company is moving in the right direction for the most part, yet will this be TNA's pivotal year?

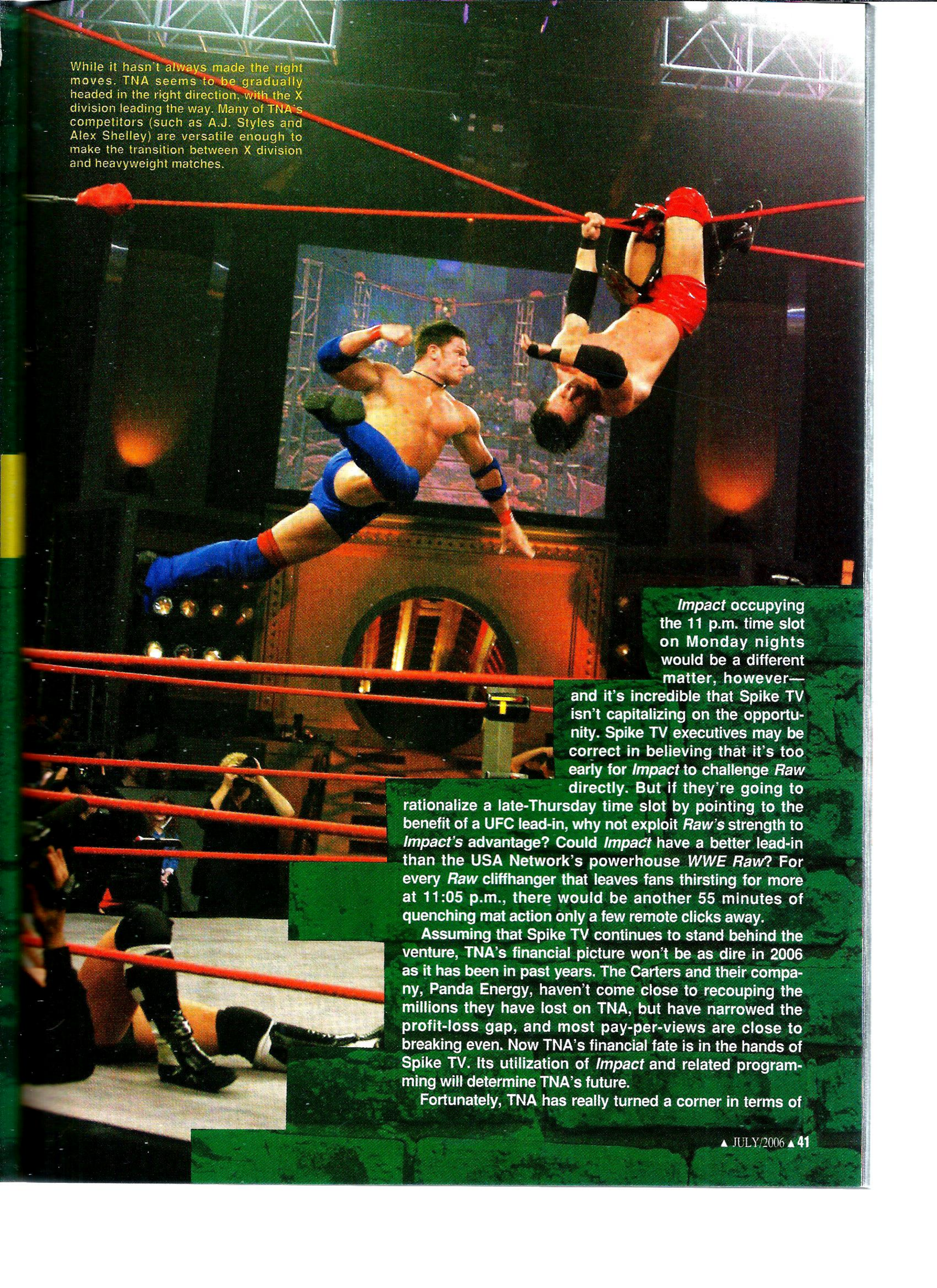


The X division has become TNA's greatest asset, leading some to wonder whether the title (here, on two-time champion Christopher Daniels) should be elevated and made equal to the NWA championship.

TNA'S QUEST TO become a profitable alternative to WWE continues to be a "long, hard slog." While it may be in bad taste to quote Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's characterization of the Iraq war, it is an apt description of the steady—but agonizingly slow—progress that TNA has made since its inception in 2002.

For every three steps forward, there seems to be two and three-quarters steps backward. Somehow, there is the faintest glimmer of hope—a destination barely out of reach—that keeps the Carters and Panda Energy in the wrestling business. So, any analysis of the state of TNA would have to include its recent setbacks, the odds of profitability in the future, and why the company's wrestlers and management remain optimistic.

The latest setback was the news that Spike TV has decided not to grant *Impact* a prime time slot on Thursday nights. Instead, *Impact* would air Thursday nights at 11 p.m. Eastern, the same timeslot it held on Saturday nights. While this bad news is actually couched in a good development, namely Spike TV's willingness to give *Impact* a weeknight slot, it could potentially have a terrible effect on TNA. Casual viewers, free of their typical weekday routines, are more likely to stumble upon *Impact* during a session of Saturday night channel surfing. Moreover, fewer fans are willing to stay up as late as 11 p.m., considering that most still must go to work the next morning.



While it hasn't always made the right moves, TNA seems to be gradually headed in the right direction, with the X division leading the way. Many of TNA's competitors (such as A.J. Styles and Alex Shelley) are versatile enough to make the transition between X division and heavyweight matches.

Impact occupying the 11 p.m. time slot on Monday nights would be a different matter, however—

and it's incredible that Spike TV isn't capitalizing on the opportunity. Spike TV executives may be correct in believing that it's too early for *Impact* to challenge *Raw* directly. But if they're going to

rationalize a late-Thursday time slot by pointing to the benefit of a UFC lead-in, why not exploit *Raw*'s strength to *Impact*'s advantage? Could *Impact* have a better lead-in than the USA Network's powerhouse *WWE Raw*? For every *Raw* cliffhanger that leaves fans thirsting for more at 11:05 p.m., there would be another 55 minutes of quenching mat action only a few remote clicks away.

Assuming that Spike TV continues to stand behind the venture, TNA's financial picture won't be as dire in 2006 as it has been in past years. The Carters and their company, Panda Energy, haven't come close to recouping the millions they have lost on TNA, but have narrowed the profit-loss gap, and most pay-per-views are close to breaking even. Now TNA's financial fate is in the hands of Spike TV. Its utilization of *Impact* and related programming will determine TNA's future.

Fortunately, TNA has really turned a corner in terms of

fan perception. No longer is TNA derided as a Southern *rasslin* company. NASCAR announcer Jeff Hammond is not part of the broadcast team on Spike TV, as he was on Fox Sports Net, and country singer Toby Keith is no longer interfering in gauntlet battle royals for the NWA title. TNA executives realize that simply featuring NASCAR personalities will not bring back the once-dependable Southern demographic turned off by WWE and the old WCW.

Another smart move was moving TNA's home base to Orlando's Universal Studios from Nashville's Fairgrounds Coliseum, dubbed "The Asylum," perhaps because the Jarretts must have been crazy to hold pay-per-views there in the first place. While the Jarretts fully endorsed the move to Orlando as the new home of *Impact*, it was at the Carters' insistence that pay-per-views be held there as well. Universal Studios does not appear as cavernous as the Fairgrounds Coliseum, and TNA has maximized the tremendous production-value potential at the facility. Slick enough to compete with *Raw*, yet intimate enough to hear the "Get your hat, get your coat, and leave" chants directed at Jeff Jarrett, Universal Studios is as upscale as TNA needs to be at this point.

Back in the primitive days of the company, when The Harris Boys were security and Gypsy Joe sat in

the front row, it was unfathomable that fans would one day chant, "TNA, TNA" during the course of a broadcast. But that's exactly what is happening at Universal, and viewers have yet to hear choruses of "Raw, Raw" or "Smack-down, Smack-down" at WWE shows.

The main reason why pro-TNA chants are heard is because of the X division, which may turn out to be the company's lasting legacy in the sport. TNA has assembled the greatest pound-for-pound wrestlers in the world, including Christopher Daniels and A.J. Styles, for the division. The 270-pound Samoa Joe has been the unlikely breakout star of the X division, proving that it wasn't just a place to exile cruiserweights.

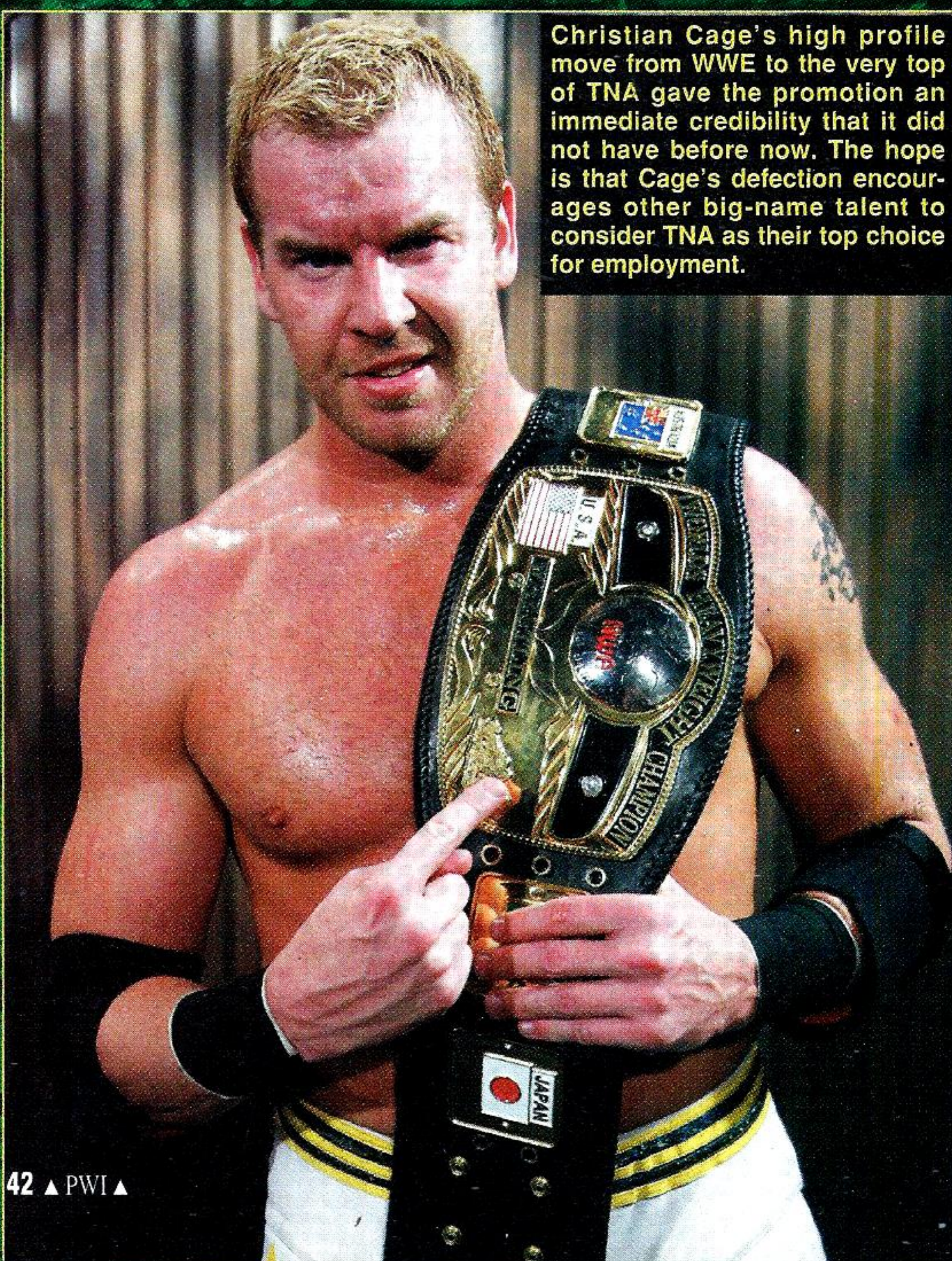
At the same time TNA enhanced the X division's credibility, Director of Authority Larry Zbyszko confronted Samoa Joe during a backstage segment on *Impact*, claiming it was time for the former X champ to advance to the heavyweight ranks. That's the purists' biggest complaint about TNA: The X division features the best wrestling action, but its championship is rarely defended in main events, and NWA heavyweight title matches often become a comical series of run-ins topped off by a screw job. Many fans want to see the X division and NWA heavyweight belts treated as titles of equal value.

So, why doesn't the TNA booking committee comply? The reasoning is simple. Committee members assume that diehards will tune in to watch the X division, even if it is treated as second-rate, but that casual fans expect to see name-brand stars—such as Sting, Scott Steiner, and others—in the main event. If TNA management relegates Sting, Steiner, and even Jeff Jarrett to the mid-card, it would diminish the very star-power it hopes to exploit.

And what about TNA's star-power? How does its talent roster compare to that of WWE?

Christian Cage's defection from WWE was an incalculable boon to TNA. "Captain Charisma" was gaining a cult following on *Raw* until an ill-timed draft to Smackdown cooled his momentum in the summer of 2005. For the first time, a genuine superstar—who wasn't the recipient of a pink slip from WWE—made the conscious decision to work for TNA. Cage escaped the mid-card stigma and was rewarded with an NWA title victory over Jeff Jarrett in February.

Thanks to WWE's budget-cutting measures of the past two years, TNA now has a number of solid, experienced



Christian Cage's high profile move from WWE to the very top of TNA gave the promotion an immediate credibility that it did not have before now. The hope is that Cage's defection encourages other big-name talent to consider TNA as their top choice for employment.

professionals on its roster from the likes of Jeff Jarrett, Rhino, Team 3D, and The James Gang. None of these men may have the in-ring finesse of a Styles or Daniels, yet they can tell the homegrown TNA stars what it's like to wrestle on live television and in front of arena crowds with 50,000 people.

The booking committee has cleverly utilized these veterans, with Rhino helping to elevate Abyss, Team Canada getting the rub from Team 3D, and The James Gang feuding with the Latin American Xchange. Undoubtedly, bookers will find an even better way to utilize B.G. James and Kip James in the future. Remember how their humiliation of The Road Warriors launched their careers? It's been a long time coming, but it's a safe bet that America's Most Wanted will leave the former "Road Dogg" and "Mr. Ass" in crumpled heaps in the near future.

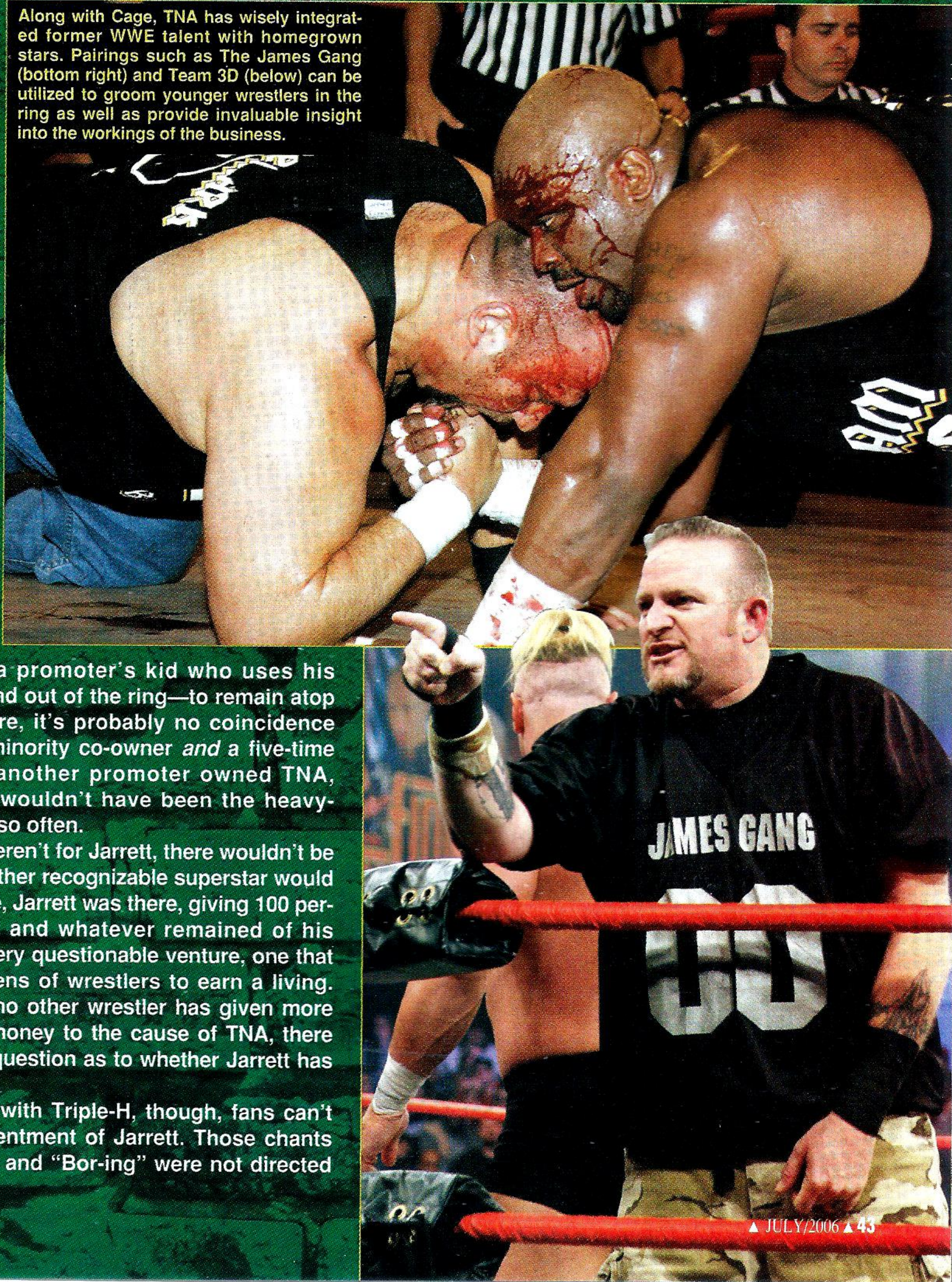
Then there's the issue of Jeff Jarrett, the lightning rod of TNA. Too often, overly critical pundits and fans dismiss Jarrett as a promoter's kid who uses his stroke—both in and out of the ring—to remain atop the company. Sure, it's probably no coincidence that Jarrett is a minority co-owner *and* a five-time NWA champ. If another promoter owned TNA, Jarrett probably wouldn't have been the heavy-weight champion so often.

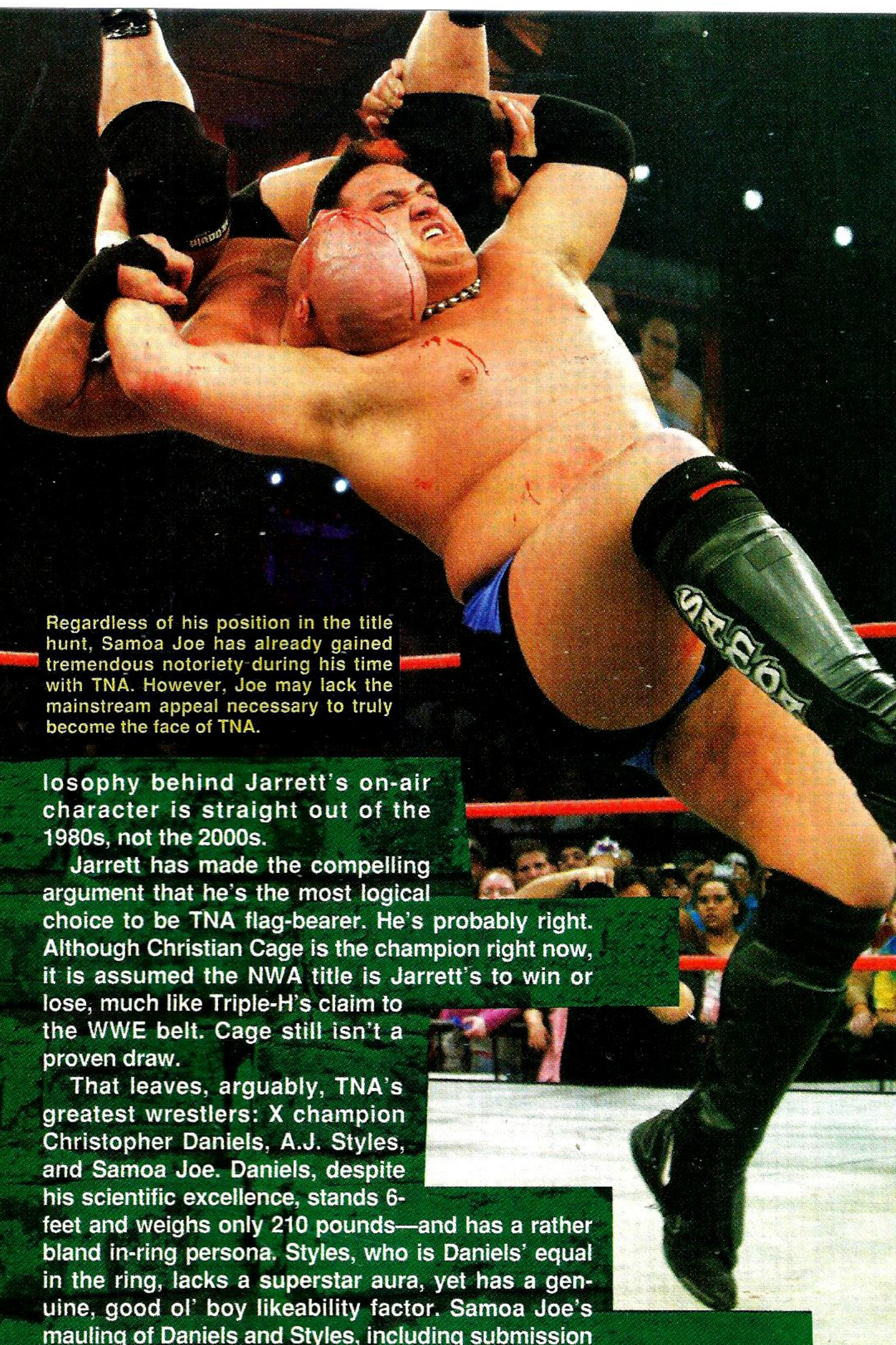
However, if it weren't for Jarrett, there wouldn't be a TNA. When no other recognizable superstar would give TNA a chance, Jarrett was there, giving 100 percent of his effort and whatever remained of his name-value to a very questionable venture, one that now enables dozens of wrestlers to earn a living. Considering that no other wrestler has given more sweat and more money to the cause of TNA, there shouldn't be any question as to whether Jarrett has paid his dues.

As is the case with Triple-H, though, fans can't get past their resentment of Jarrett. Those chants of "Drop the belt" and "Bor-ing" were not directed

toward a villain that fans love to hate. They really do hate Jarrett. If Jarrett acknowledged what everyone in TNA's audience already knows, which is his ownership stake in the company, then fans may stop resenting him. His insistence that TNA management is against him is ridiculous. That would be like Vince McMahon claiming the WWE chairman is against him! It's amazing that Jarrett, the third-generation of his family in the business, is unwilling to obey an important rule of pro wrestling: If you can't keep it a secret, then exploit it. Right now, the phi-

Along with Cage, TNA has wisely integrated former WWE talent with homegrown stars. Pairings such as The James Gang (bottom right) and Team 3D (below) can be utilized to groom younger wrestlers in the ring as well as provide invaluable insight into the workings of the business.





Regardless of his position in the title hunt, Samoa Joe has already gained tremendous notoriety during his time with TNA. However, Joe may lack the mainstream appeal necessary to truly become the face of TNA.

Philosophy behind Jarrett's on-air character is straight out of the 1980s, not the 2000s.

Jarrett has made the compelling argument that he's the most logical choice to be TNA flag-bearer. He's probably right. Although Christian Cage is the champion right now, it is assumed the NWA title is Jarrett's to win or lose, much like Triple-H's claim to the WWE belt. Cage still isn't a proven draw.

That leaves, arguably, TNA's greatest wrestlers: X champion Christopher Daniels, A.J. Styles, and Samoa Joe. Daniels, despite his scientific excellence, stands 6-feet and weighs only 210 pounds—and has a rather bland in-ring persona. Styles, who is Daniels' equal in the ring, lacks a superstar aura, yet has a genuine, good ol' boy likeability factor. Samoa Joe's mauling of Daniels and Styles, including submission victories over both, has harmed them greatly in recent months.

What about Samoa Joe? He's already the first TNA wrestler to be the lone subject of a *PWI* cover. His genuine tough-guy image has garnered him a cult following in TNA. The fans respect Joe, much like they have respected The Undertaker or Arn Anderson, but does he possess the star-power to carry an entire company? He definitely has a unique look, and his groundswell of popularity is reminiscent of Bill Goldberg's in WCW or Steve Austin's in WWE. But could a nearly 300-pounder, without a

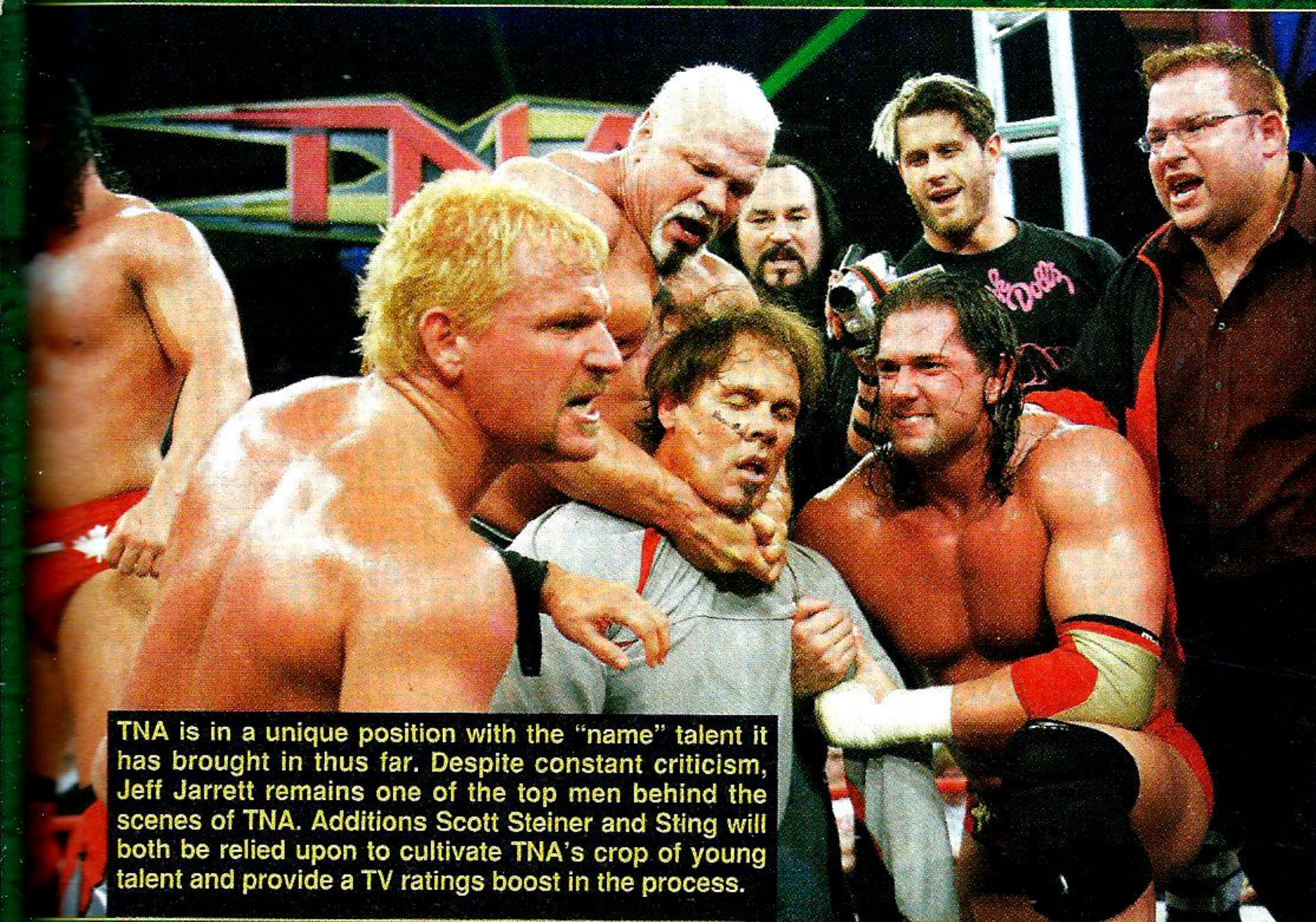
remarkable physique, ever be a viable mainstream representative of the company?

There's also the man called Sting. Would "The Stinger" be a viable NWA champion? Considering Sting held the title 15 years ago, and that he's a former WCW champ, he has nothing to prove. Any TNA wrestler would benefit from Sting's spotlight, and the California native's potential to elevate new stars is limitless. At 46 years old, Sting was impressive enough during his tag team outing with Christian Cage at Final Resolution to warrant chants of "You still got it!" from the cynical crowd at Universal Studios. Like Shawn Michaels in WWE, Ric Flair in WWE and WCW, and even Mr. Wrestling II in Georgia and the Mid-South, Sting can ensure that his legacy transcends his own career.

TNA's latest big-name superstar, Scott Steiner, doesn't have that ability. While Steiner still possesses plenty of charisma, despite his humiliating matches against Spike Dudley toward the end of his WWE stint, he isn't likeable enough to be accepted in a Sting or Shawn Michaels role.

Steiner, like The Road Warriors, must remain invincible to maintain his star-power—and that isn't useful to TNA in the long term.

As much as "smart fans" criticize established veterans such as Sting, Steiner, Team 3D, and The James Gang for hogging the spotlight, their presence has given the impression to casual fans that TNA is on par with WWE. Cage was the greatest coup of all because he is a contemporary star. For that same reason, recruiting Chris Jericho or Brock Lesnar would be more beneficial than signing Bill



TNA is in a unique position with the "name" talent it has brought in thus far. Despite constant criticism, Jeff Jarrett remains one of the top men behind the scenes of TNA. Additions Scott Steiner and Sting will both be relied upon to cultivate TNA's crop of young talent and provide a TV ratings boost in the process.

return helped the show reach the 1.0-mark for the first time in its history. But TNA's booking committee should be aware that fans don't want to see him in re-hashed feuds with Jarrett and Steiner. They want him to be a vital part of the mix, gracing the ring with Cage, Daniels, Styles, and Samoa Joe. Even matches with former WWE veterans such as Team 3D and The James Gang would be refreshing.

For the first time since the company's inception, we are not tempted to write TNA's obituary in "The State Of The Game." The consensus

Goldberg or The Ultimate Warrior. If TNA could fuel the notion that it's the place to be, much like WCW did at the WWF's expense in the mid-1990s, a genuine promotional war could be on the horizon. The sight of so many former WWE stars in TNA is already creating that impression.

Yet, TNA would be the likely loser if a full-scale promotional war develops. Unlike WCW, TNA doesn't have the financial resources to resist WWE talent raids.

America's Most Wanted would be WWE's number-one target. WWE Creative has already pushed the team of Lance Cade and Trevor Murdoch, no doubt inspired by AMW. The NWA tag team champions have a marketable image, although the name "America's Most Wanted" could create a trademark issue. Reportedly, WWE was in contact with Abyss in January 2005. Monty Brown is another superstar in the making. Despite his loss to NWA champ Christian Cage at Destination X, Brown's charisma, physique, and athletic background would make him an obvious choice for WWE. The Naturals and Team Canada would also be potential hot free agents. Management would be well-advised to make all the aforementioned stars as comfortable as possible in TNA.

Sting's latest comeback should boost *Impact's* ratings throughout the spring and early summer, just as his original

among the editorial staff is that TNA will still be alive in 2007. Spike TV, the Carters, the Jarretts, and a locker room full of enthusiastic wrestlers have invested too much in it. □



As beneficial as it may be to bring in established talent, the key to TNA's long-term success will be maintaining its roster of future stars. Wrestlers such as Chris Harris and James Storm of America's Most Wanted appear to have bright futures ahead of them. TNA would be wise to ensure they stay in Orlando as long as possible.

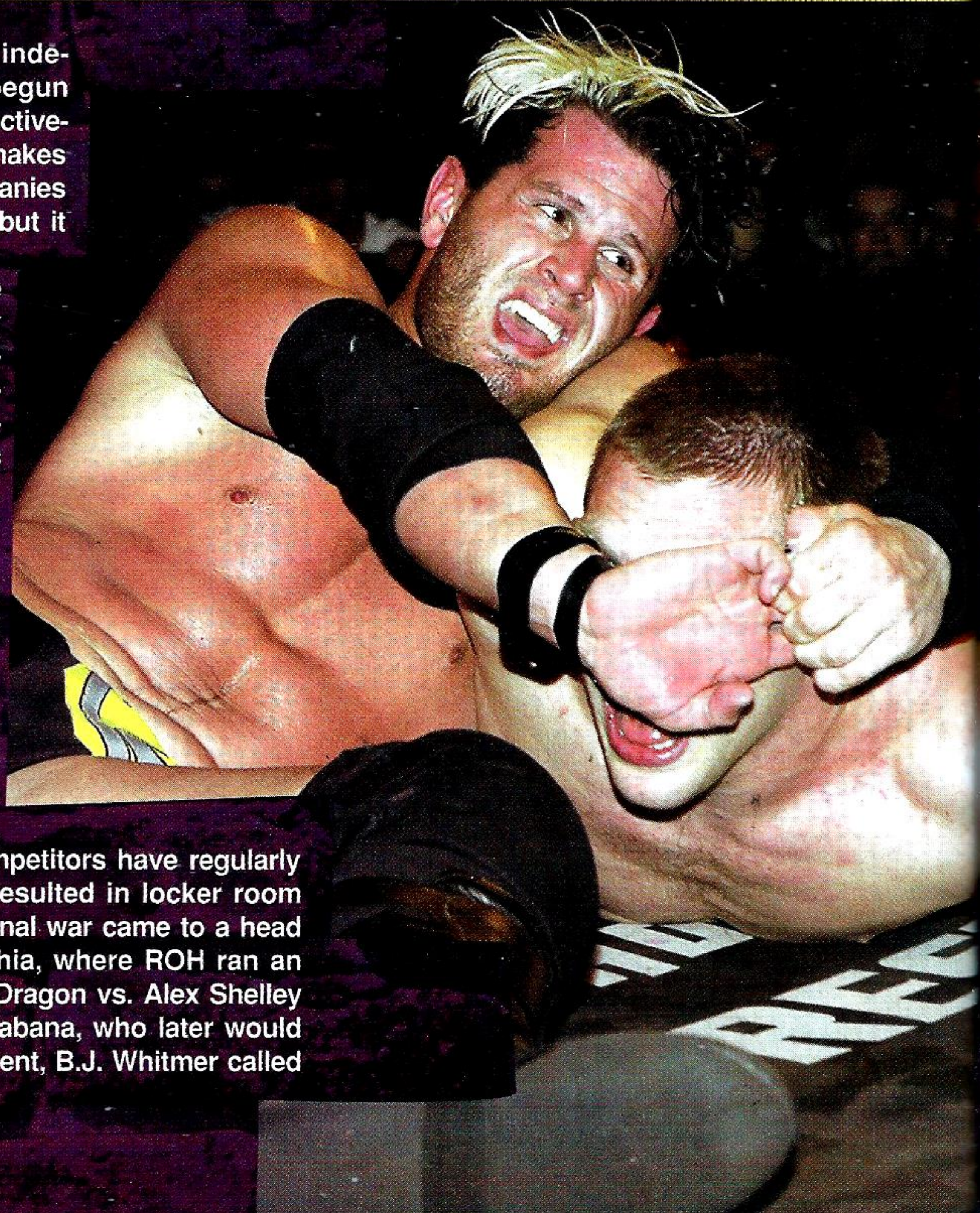
STATE OF INDEPENDENT WRESTLING

There are weed whackers showing up in ROH, an Assassin running the show in Deep South, and record-setting crowds in Maryland. These are strange times for independent wrestling ... and that's a good thing

OVER THE PAST few years, independent promotions have begun to test the waters on the effectiveness of inter-promotion rivalries. It makes a lot of sense for two smaller companies to cooperate and share resources, but it can also be a risky proposition.

Ring of Honor and Combat Zone Wrestling are currently smartly working together, and both companies have profited from the collaboration. In January 2006, ROH champion Bryan Danielson defended his title against CZW's Chris Hero. Hero, Necro Butcher, and other CZW stars had been insulting ROH's technically fundamental style of wrestling and espousing the virtues of their more hardcore, ultra-violent brand of competition. Danielson scored the win in a close contest on a ROH card to the delight of the ROH faithful.

Things didn't end there. Hero, Necro Butcher, and other CZW competitors have regularly interrupted ROH cards that have resulted in locker room emptying brawls. The interpromotional war came to a head during a March show in Philadelphia, where ROH ran an afternoon card featuring American Dragon vs. Alex Shelley and Christopher Daniels vs. Colt Cabana, who later would fall to Samoa Joe. After the main event, B.J. Whitmer called



Cross-promotional feuds are a very effective tool on the independent circuit if handled properly. Fans of both ROH's traditional, technical style (Alex Shelley crossfaces Bryan Danielson, opposite page) and CZW's hardcore mayhem (Nick Gage steps on Danny Havoc among shards of broken glass, below) are being treated to the best of both worlds.



out the CZW crew, who proceeded to beat down Whitmer and Joe with barbed-wire baseball bats, weed whackers, and staple guns. The CZW crew then trashed the ROH set and banners and proceeded to run their own scheduled card, complete with an interpromotional main event of Austin Aries, Roderick Strong, and Matt Sydal against Ruckus, Eddie Kingston, and Necro Butcher.

The event was a major success, with attendance estimates at around 900 at the former ECW Arena. The companies wisely appealed to their own fan bases first and foremost, with ROH showcasing its scientific matches with tons of near falls and false finishes, and CZW adding the unpredictability and mayhem its fans have come to expect. Both companies can work together and keep their unique identity, and there's every reason to believe they will continue to do so during the rest of 2006.

Cross-promotional feuds work best when both promotions have a viable exit strategy. If, when the feud has run

its course, both promotions are able to escape with their rosters and fan bases intact and can pick up rejuvenated interest from the feud along the way, then it can be labeled a success. There is a very real possibility, however, that the feud will have the unintended effect of elevating the status of one promotion at the expense of the other. The key here is for one-time business rivals to be able to cooperate and work for the common good. Indy promoters around the country should keep a watchful eye on what ultimately happens to ROH and CZW.

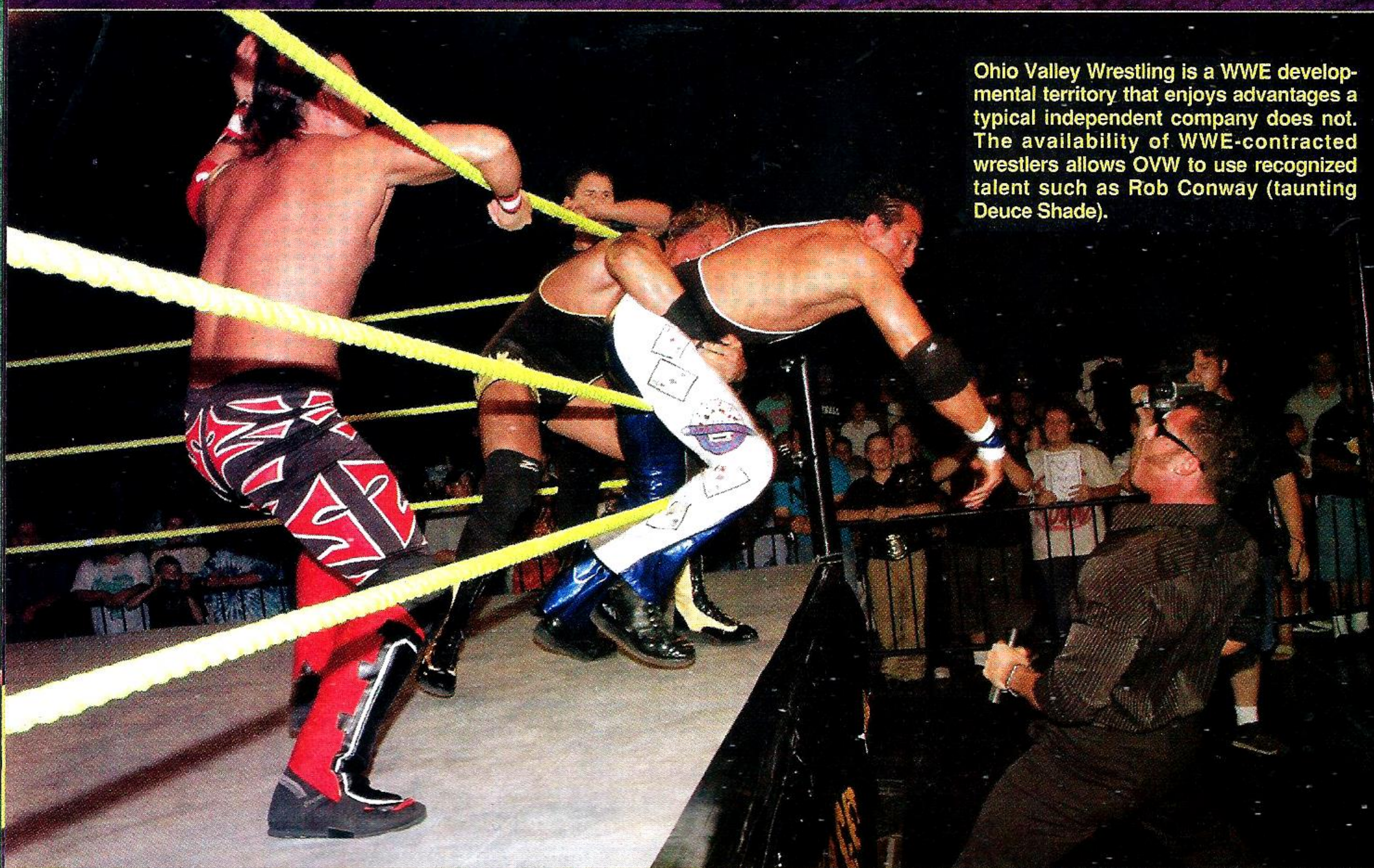
There are plenty of independent promotions that are doing quite well on their own. The National Wrestling Alliance now boasts more than 40 territories scattered throughout North America, with TNA obviously the main body. TNA's success on Spike TV has helped rebuild the NWA brand name after it had lain dormant for more than a decade. As more fans discover TNA, there will be an increased likelihood of them attending an independent card under the NWA banner. Many promotions bring in TNA stars like Abyss, Christopher Daniels, and Rhino to further underscore the link to TNA with its fan base. Historically, the NWA champion would regularly tour territories and defend the title against top local stars. Giving new life to that tradition, Christian Cage competed on a ROH card and may prove to be more willing to defend the title outside TNA more frequently

than his predecessor, Jeff Jarrett.

The new AWA, consisting of about 25 territories in the North America, Europe, and Japan, operates in a similar manner, but it lacks the luxury of national television some of the individual promotions have struggled.

Ohio Valley Wrestling and Deep South Wrestling are not independent promotions in the traditional sense, since they also serve as developmental systems for WWE. They don't have to worry as much about drawing crowds and paying the bills, since they are subsidized by WWE. OVW's television programming has taken a major change under Paul Heyman's guidance as shows feature more backstage vignettes and developed (albeit sometimes cartoonish) characters—a big change from former OVW booker Jim Cornette's vision of old-fashioned Southern wrestling. As of press time, Jody "The Assassin" Hamilton was feuding with Palmer Cannon over control of Deep South.

Back on the East Coast, the ECWA's famous Super 8 Tournament celebrated its 10th anniversary this year (*see feature story on page 108*). The event has been a launching pad to the careers of such notables as Styles, Daniels, The Hardy Boys, Paul



Ohio Valley Wrestling is a WWE developmental territory that enjoys advantages a typical independent company does not. The availability of WWE-contracted wrestlers allows OVW to use recognized talent such as Rob Conway (taunting Deuce Shade).

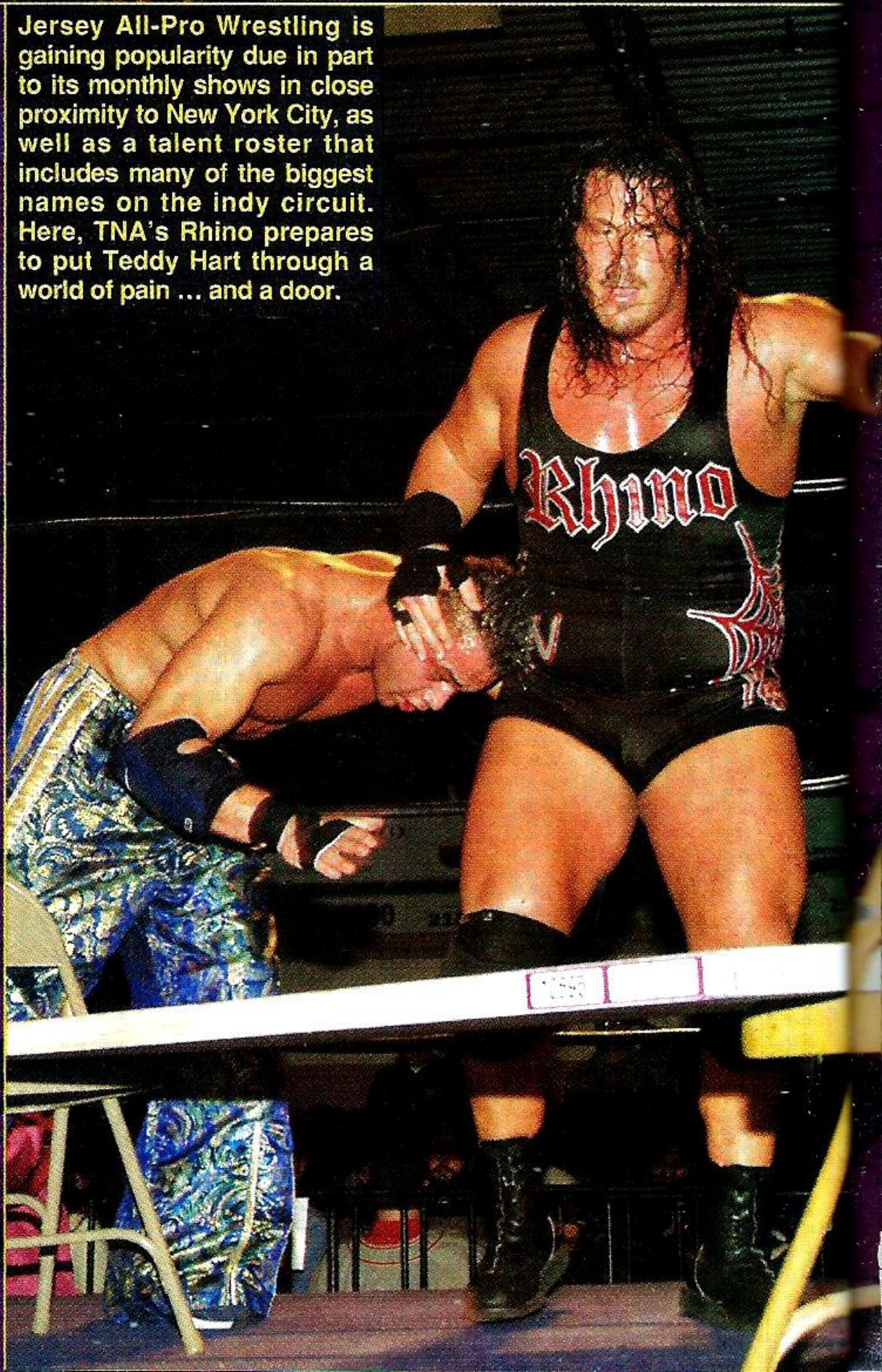
London, Low-Ki, and many, many more. Promoter Jim Kettner has found a winning formula in building the company around his signature annual event, and presenting family-friendly matches and unique characters. Super 8 videotapes have also become solid sellers nationally.

Jersey All-Pro Wrestling has also developed into one of the most influential indie promotions in the country, running monthly shows with the likes of Teddy Hart, Trent Acid, and Homicide. Acid and his Backseat Men partner, Johnny Kashmere, are two of the focal points of Pro Wrestling Unplugged, which is building a strong following in Philadelphia. Of course, having ECW superstars Tod Gordon and The Sandman involved in the company doesn't hurt when you're running shows in that city.

It looks like the rumors of IWA Mid-South's demise were premature after all. Promoter Ian Rotten had made some cryptic remarks online about the future of the company prior to the 2005 Ted Petty Invitational tournament, IWA-Mid-South's signature event. While there's no such thing as security on the on the indie circuit—two or three bad houses can kill a company—IWA Mid-South is continuing to survive. Matt Sydal beat Kevin Steel in the tournament finals to claim the title of 2005 TPI tournament winner.

Speaking of tournaments, CHIKARA has upped the ante with its 32-team annual Grand Prix tag team tournament. The 2006 tourney—which featured women's teams and mixed teams—was won by Hero

Jersey All-Pro Wrestling is gaining popularity due in part to its monthly shows in close proximity to New York City, as well as a talent roster that includes many of the biggest names on the indie circuit. Here, TNA's Rhino prepares to put Teddy Hart through a world of pain ... and a door.



and Claudio Castagnoli, when they defeated Milano Collection A.T. and Skayde in the finals. CHIKARA may not be for everyone (if you're not into comedy, you're not going to like CHIKARA) but it has been thriving, due in part to co-promotional efforts with PWU and other groups in Pennsylvania.

Maryland Championship Wrestling, which closed shop in 2003, experienced a "resurrection" on a February 26 show that drew 1,260 fans. The promotion followed up that show a month later with another tremendously successful event that featured a TNA X division title match. If MCW can keep its early momentum going through the summer and into fall, the promotion could once again become a major force on the indy scene.

ROH promoter Gabe Sapolsky has also helped rejuvenate Florida wrestling with Full Impact Pro, an indy that could be considered something of a Ring of Honor developmental. The Pittsburgh-based International Wrestling Cartel continues to crown a Super Indy champion each year, and the prestige of that title continues to grow.

Over on the West Coast, Pro Wrestling Guerilla and Ultimate Pro Wrestling are running solid shows with the likes of Super Dragon, Kevin Steen, B-Boy (PWG), Davey Richards, and Tom Howard (UPW). After winning the Super 8 Tournament in April with an upset victory over Charlie Haas, Richards decided not to have the trophy shipped west. The promising youngster signed with Ring of Honor.

There are several keys to an indy promotion's survival: They need to present an alternative to the wrestling that fans see on TV. They need to run consistently and keep their fan base updated through a Web site. They need to balance spending on big name stars with how many

fans those names will draw. And they need to create their own identifiable style. ROH, IWA Mid-South, CHIKARA, and CZW are all vastly different companies with their own unique styles. And they are all surviving in the cutthroat indy world. There will always be fly-by-night promotions that spring up and vanish just as abruptly, but the true indy success stories are consistently drawing fans, selling DVDs, and providing a welcome alternative to WWE and TNA. □

ECWA's Super 8 has become arguably the premier tournament on the independent circuit, bringing talent from across the indy landscape to Newark, Delaware.



CHIKARA's 2006 Grand Prix tag team tournament welcomed 32 teams from various independents, all competing for the newly created championship straps. While the promotion has been relatively successful, its inclusion of a comedic style of wrestler (such as the giant squirrel, Necro Butcher, chomping down on Matt Turner) may not appeal to wrestling purists.

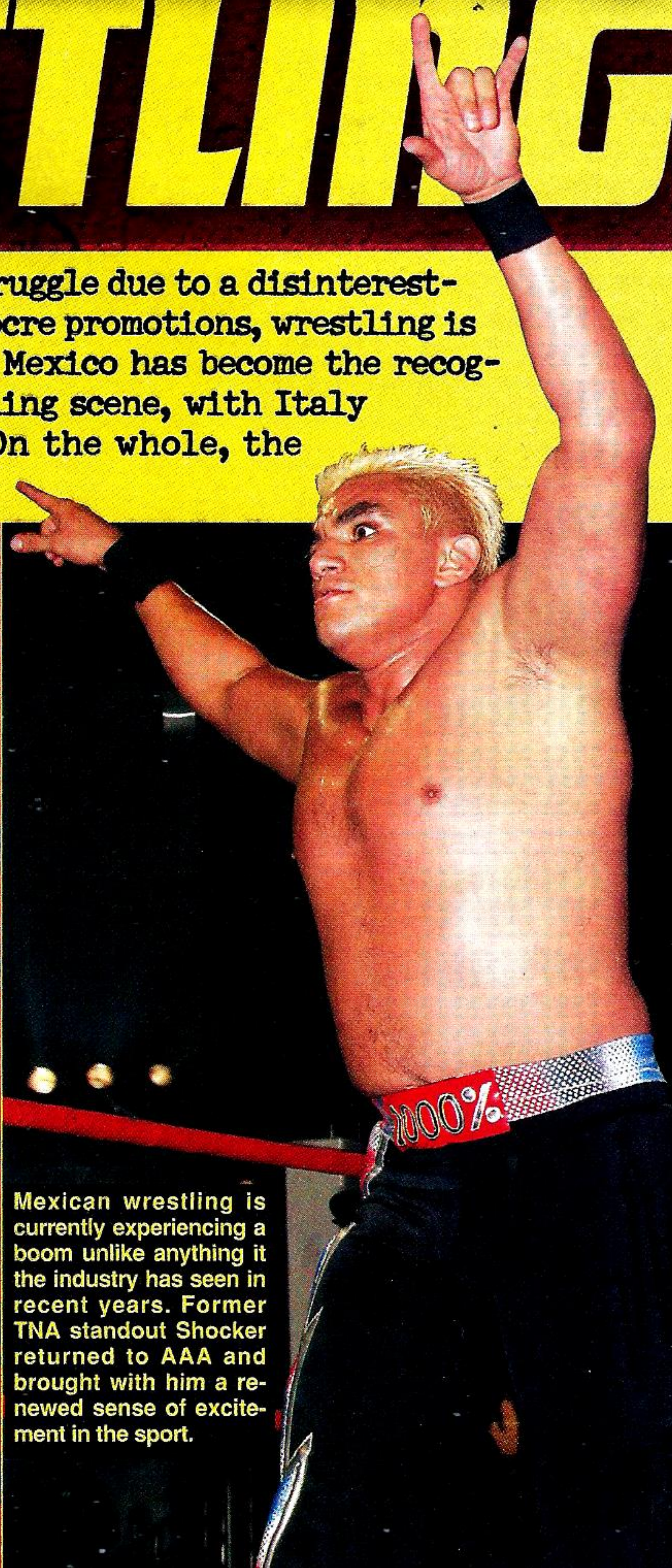


STATE OF INTERNATIONAL WRESTLING

While Japanese promotions continue to struggle due to a disinterested fan base and an overabundance of mediocre promotions, wrestling is flourishing in other areas of the world. Mexico has become the recognized leader of the international wrestling scene, with Italy experiencing a resurgence of its own. On the whole, the sport is thriving on a global level

LUCHA LIBRE HAS caught fire over the last 18 months, and the result has been the biggest business boom in Mexico since the mid-1990s, when AAA first rose as serious competition for the *Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre* (CMLL). In the 1980s, competition between CMLL and the UWA spurred the business into a long boom period, but the UWA ultimately collapsed, and CMLL was left alone at the top, not unlike the situation the WWE saw just a few years ago in the United States. In the early-'90s, then-CMLL matchmaker Antonio Pena took a slice of the roster and formed his own company, AAA, which has been the main rival to the steadfast CMLL ever since. Within just a couple years, AAA's fast-paced, reckless style brought fans back in droves, and lucha libre was back en vogue. However, when many of Mexico's top stars slowly started heading elsewhere for work (WCW, for example), lucha lost some steam and things cooled off.

As it turns out, 2005 was a landmark year for both CMLL and AAA with incredible attendance figures that were sustained all through the year, as well as soaring television ratings and a proliferation of smaller, independent events built around visiting stars from the big promotions. At its home base of Arena Mexico, CMLL has seen a staggering number



Mexican wrestling is currently experiencing a boom unlike anything it the industry has seen in recent years. Former TNA standout Shocker returned to AAA and brought with him a renewed sense of excitement in the sport.

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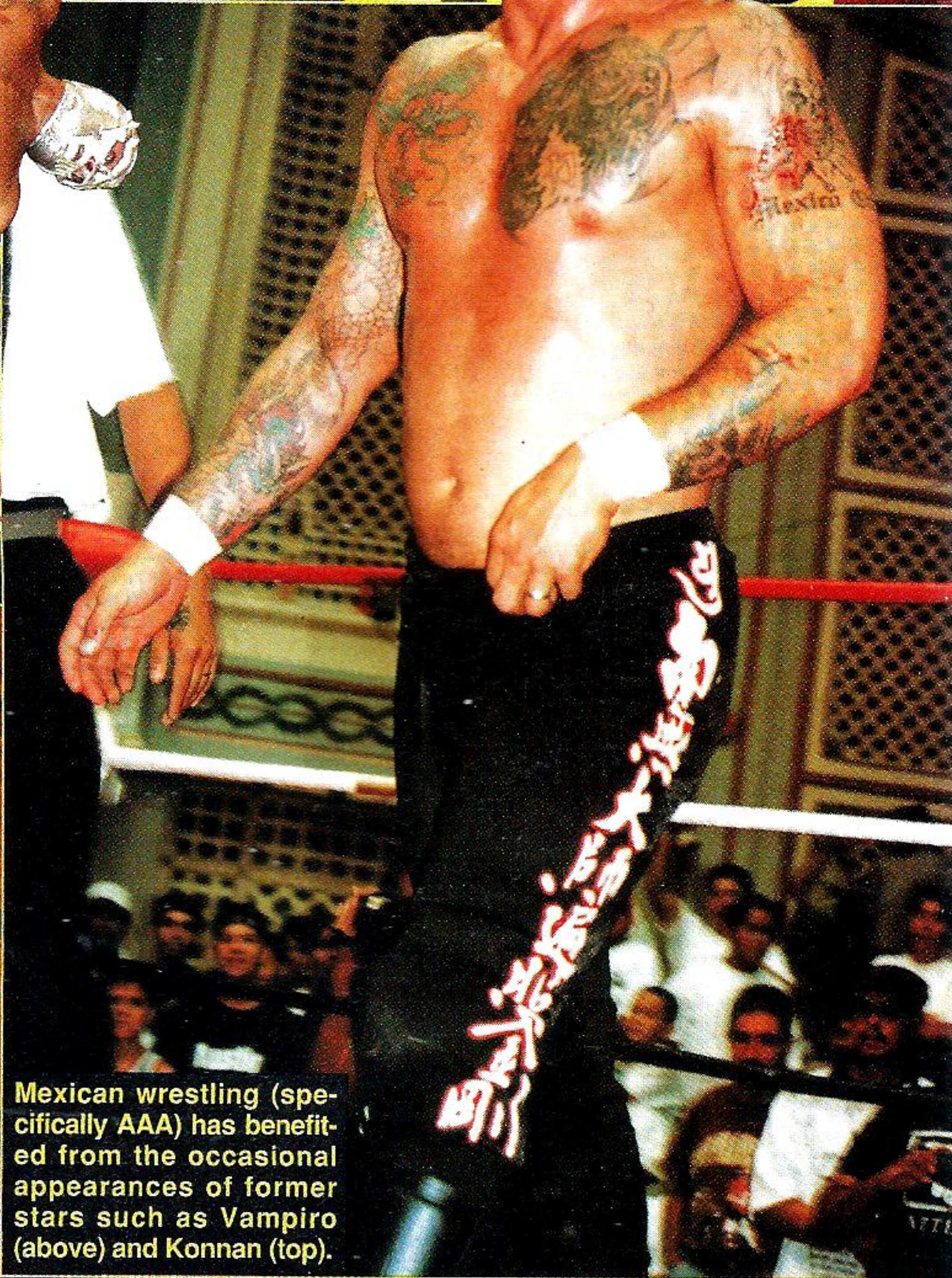
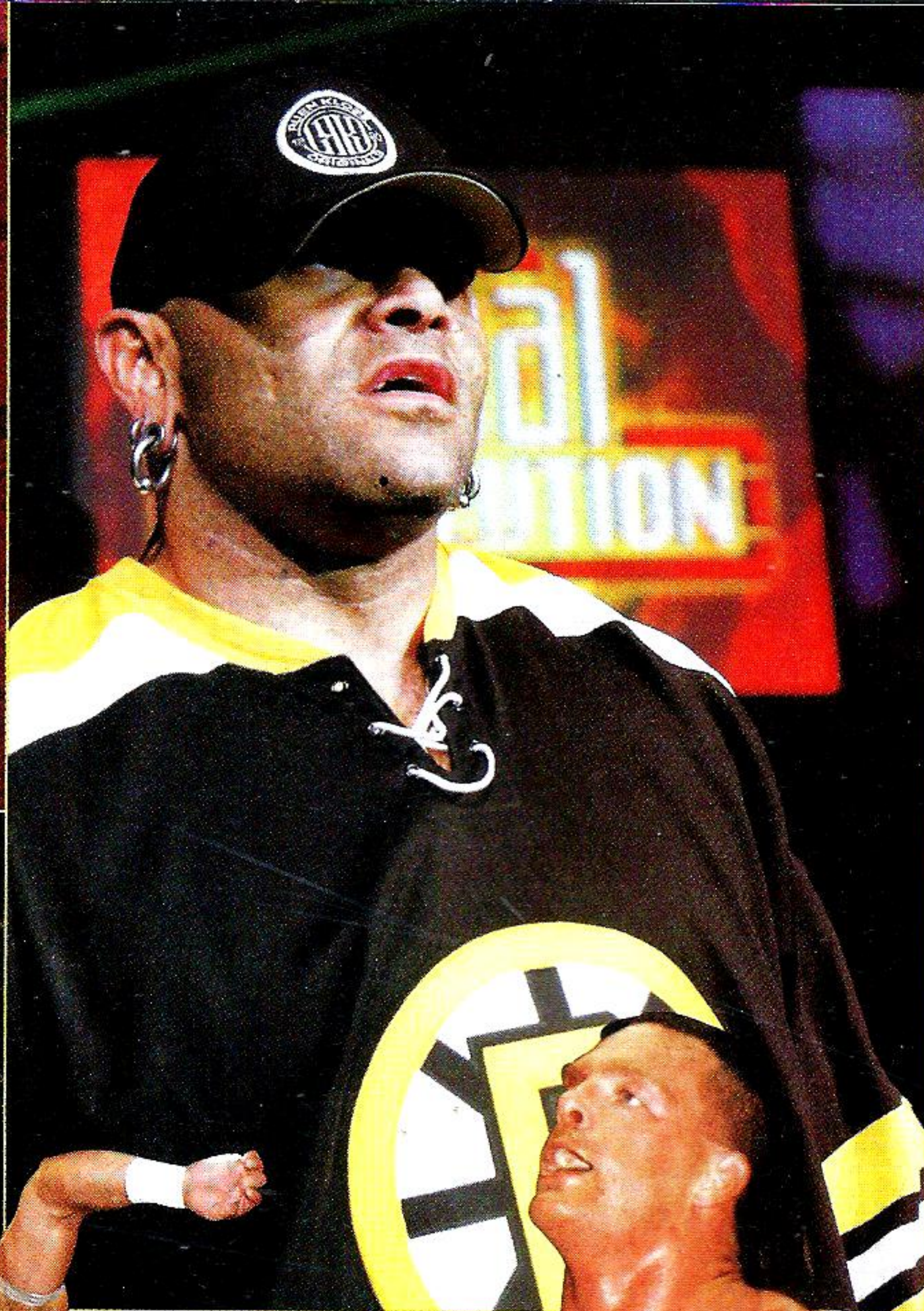
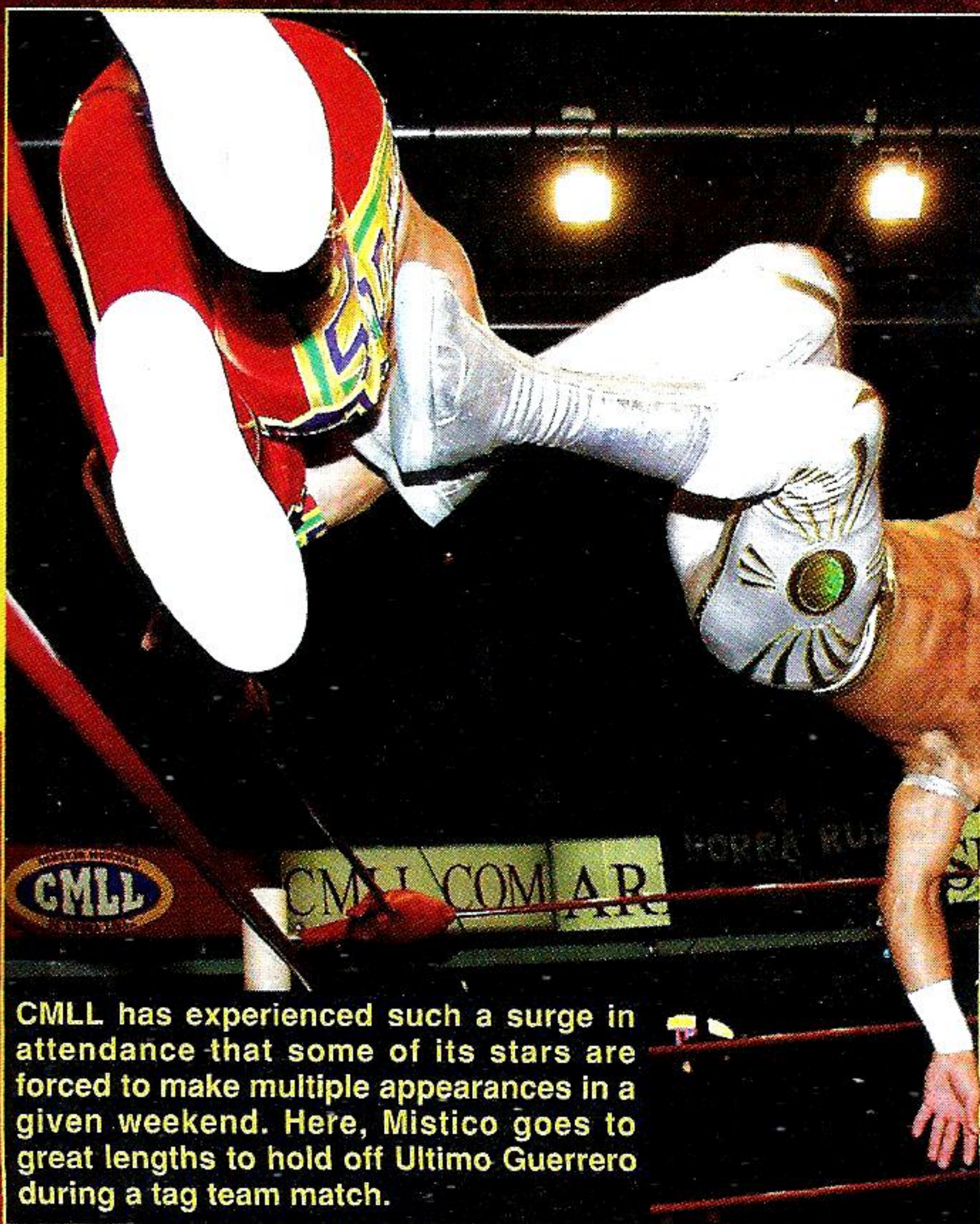


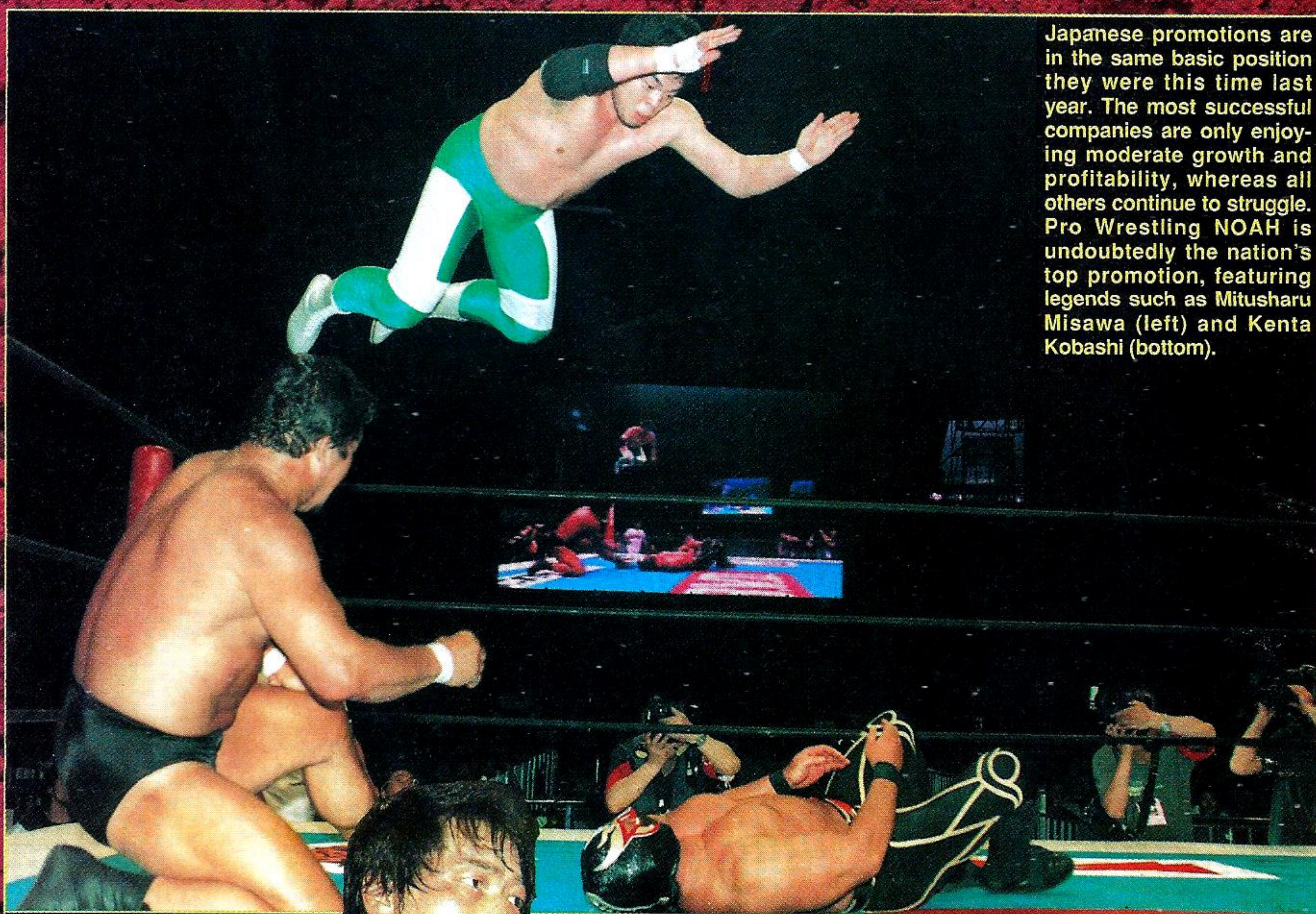
Photo by Dorothy Lee

CMLL has experienced such a surge in attendance that some of its stars are forced to make multiple appearances in a given weekend. Here, Mistico goes to great lengths to hold off Ultimo Guerrero during a tag team match.

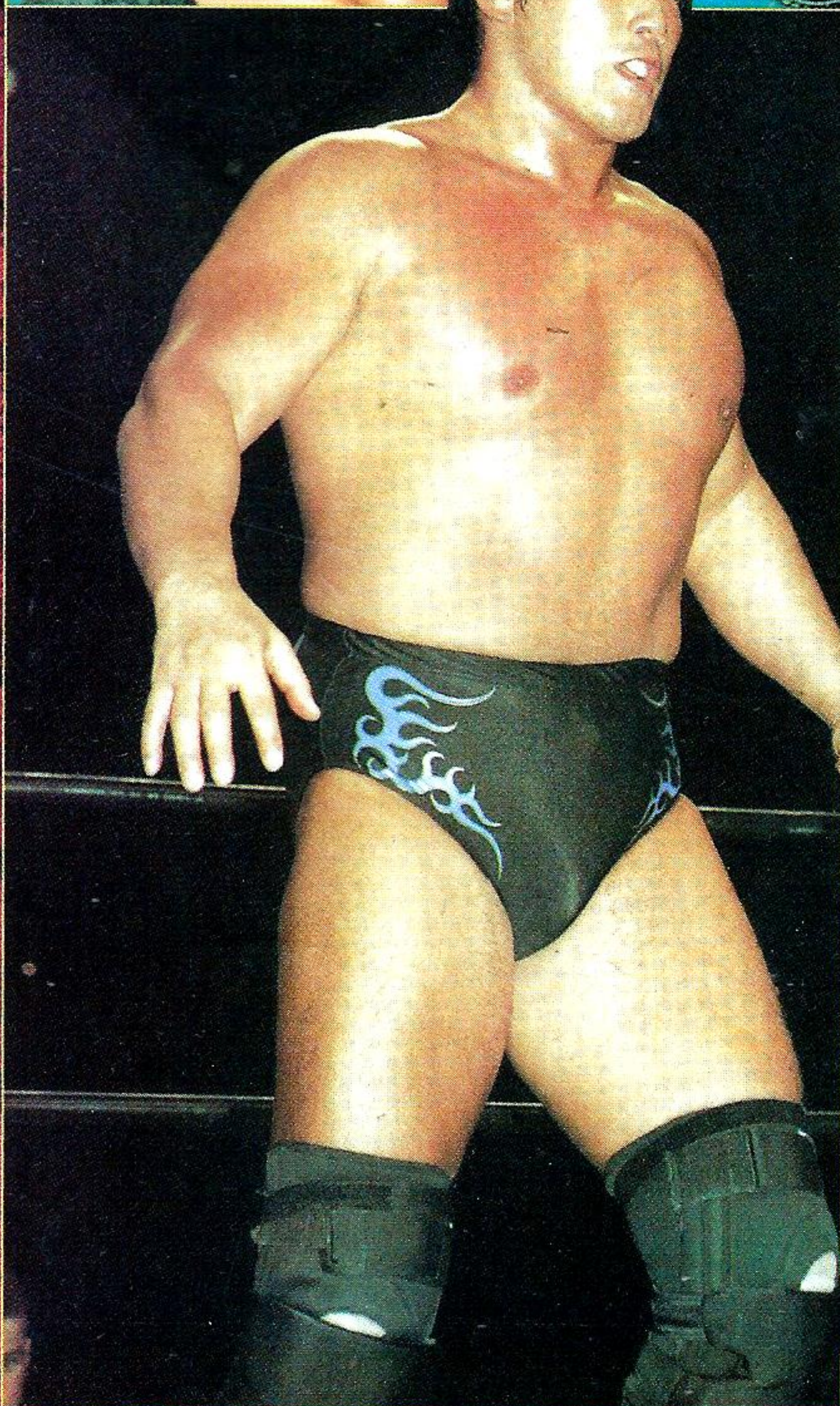
of sellouts, with hot cards selling out well in advance. This is a rarity in the Mexico City scene, where advance sales usually pale in comparison to walk-up sales the day of the event. Stars of CMLL are so in-demand on the independent circuit that some of the most popular names, like Mistico and Ultimo Guerrero, wrestle five or six times per weekend. With the return of big names from the 1990s boom, like Konnan and Vampiro, and bolstered by new additions like the red-hot Shocker, AAA has also seen attendance figures pick up, and more and more regional promoters are looking to buy AAA events for their local venues.

Smaller promotions, like the Naucalpan-based IWRG and the Tlanepantla-based AULL, are holding tight to their loyal fan bases. The ENESMA group,

Mexican wrestling (specifically AAA) has benefited from the occasional appearances of former stars such as Vampiro (above) and Konnan (top).



Japanese promotions are in the same basic position they were this time last year. The most successful companies are only enjoying moderate growth and profitability, whereas all others continue to struggle. Pro Wrestling NOAH is undoubtedly the nation's top promotion, featuring legends such as Mitsuharu Misawa (left) and Kenta Kobashi (bottom).



which had large-scale broadcast penetration due to a national television deal, is still sputtering along with small cards since losing their broadcast deal. It is expected to re-launch on TV Azteca soon with a new name and image, using whatever top-notch freelance talent is available. The lucha boom has also begotten more and more weekly publications covering the sport in Mexico. With new additions, like *Los Guerreros*, added to old standards like *Luchas 2000*, there are now more than a half-dozen lucha periodicals being published.

In the last 12 months, Mitsuharu Misawa's Pro Wrestling NOAH has cemented its position as the top *puroresu* promotion. With the Japanese wrestling business experiencing record lows in attendance and interest, NOAH is still expanding its fan base with exciting main event matches and solid undercard performances. NOAH shows are home to some of Japan's most legendary heavyweights, including Misawa, Kenta Kobashi, and Akira Taue, as well as some of the most cutting-edge junior heavyweights active today, including KENTA and Ricky Marvin (now wrestling there under the guise of Mushiking Joker).

The stars of NOAH have been touring outside their native Japan in the past year, and this has only helped raise the company's international profile. Top-flight ambassadors, like Kobashi, Naomichi

Marufuji, and KENTA, have wrestled in the United States, United Kingdom, and continental Europe, marking the first time some of these top draws have appeared in other countries. With the aid of a strong weekly television program, NOAH has ascended to the top of the heap. This quick turnaround has been bolstered by the decline in business for the next closest challenger for the throne, New Japan Pro Wrestling.

Back in November 2005, DVD and video game conglomerate Yukes bought New Japan, which sparked hope that the company's poor fortunes might be turned around. The last three years have seen fans abandoning New Japan in droves, and a new direction seemed crucial. Insiders expected that Yukes might bring stability to the promotion, as well as a fresh outlook. However, when the time came for the renewal of the wrestlers' annual contracts in January 2006, nearly a dozen New Japan regulars weren't re-signed. Those that stayed took sizeable pay cuts just to retain their jobs. Since then, New Japan's fortunes have seen no turnaround whatsoever, even with the added star power of current IWGP heavyweight champion and former WWE superstar Brock Lesnar. From a business standpoint, New Japan is on life support, and fan interest has all but bottomed out.

Holding steady in Japan are groups like Zero One Max, Dragon Gate, Michinoku Pro, and All Japan Pro Wrestling, which have seen no appreciable change in size over the course of the last year. Almost without exception, these companies feature the same wrestlers they did at this time a year ago. All Japan and Zero One are Tokyo-based promotions, while Michinoku (which means "northeast") sticks to a remote quadrant of the country. Dragon Gate always stays near its home base of Kobe.

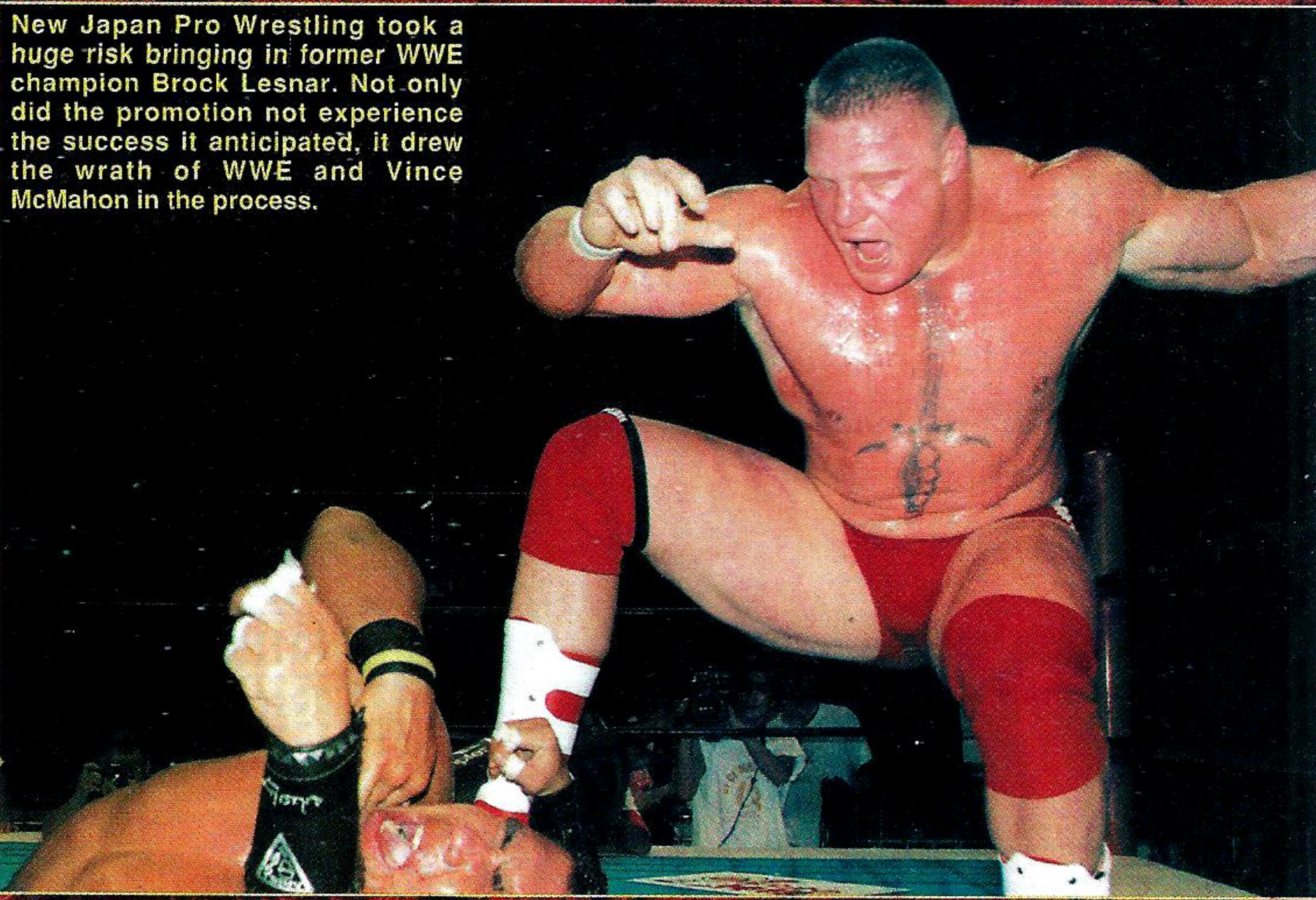
Since last year, Super Delfin's Osaka Pro has lost some serious momentum, triggered by the departure of 10 of the company's biggest stars. Ultimo Dragon's Japanese promotion, Dragon Door, has vanished following legal issues with chief financial backer Livedoor. Dragon maintains a small promotion in Mexico that runs quarterly cards at the CMLL con-

trolled *Arena Coliseo* and is trying to revive a Japanese presence for his protégés under the banner of "El Dorado." Upstart groups King's Road and Big Mouth Loud have their work cut for them, trying to find a new audience during one of *puroresu's* biggest slumps.

Partially to blame for the downturn in Japan is the rise of mixed martial arts groups Pride and K-1, which are doing monstrous business right now promoting a rougher, no-holds-barred style of fighting similar to America's Ultimate Fighting Championship. Especially in the past year, it seems that more and more fan dollars are buying tickets to MMA events rather than to pro wrestling events in Japan.

In other parts of the world, wrestling has maintained an even keel, with one possible exception. Thanks to the arrival of WWE's *Smackdown* on free television, Italy has become a new wrestling hotspot. Independent promotions are booming in Italy as the popularity of the Smackdown brand has led a total revival of wrestling there. Wrestlers are regarded as mainstream celebrities there, and business in Italy dwarfs the trends in other parts of Europe. How long interest will remain high is anyone's guess. To a lesser extent, the United Kingdom has seen more in the way of new companies and live events, with interest bolstered by The Wrestling Channel, a cable network playing pro wrestling around the clock from various promotions. Like Puerto Rico, Europe has continued to be a strong area for wrestling in the past few years. With the notable exception of Japan, wrestling in general seems to be on the rise in many parts of the world. □

New Japan Pro Wrestling took a huge risk bringing in former WWE champion Brock Lesnar. Not only did the promotion not experience the success it anticipated, it drew the wrath of WWE and Vince McMahon in the process.



STATE OF THE STARS

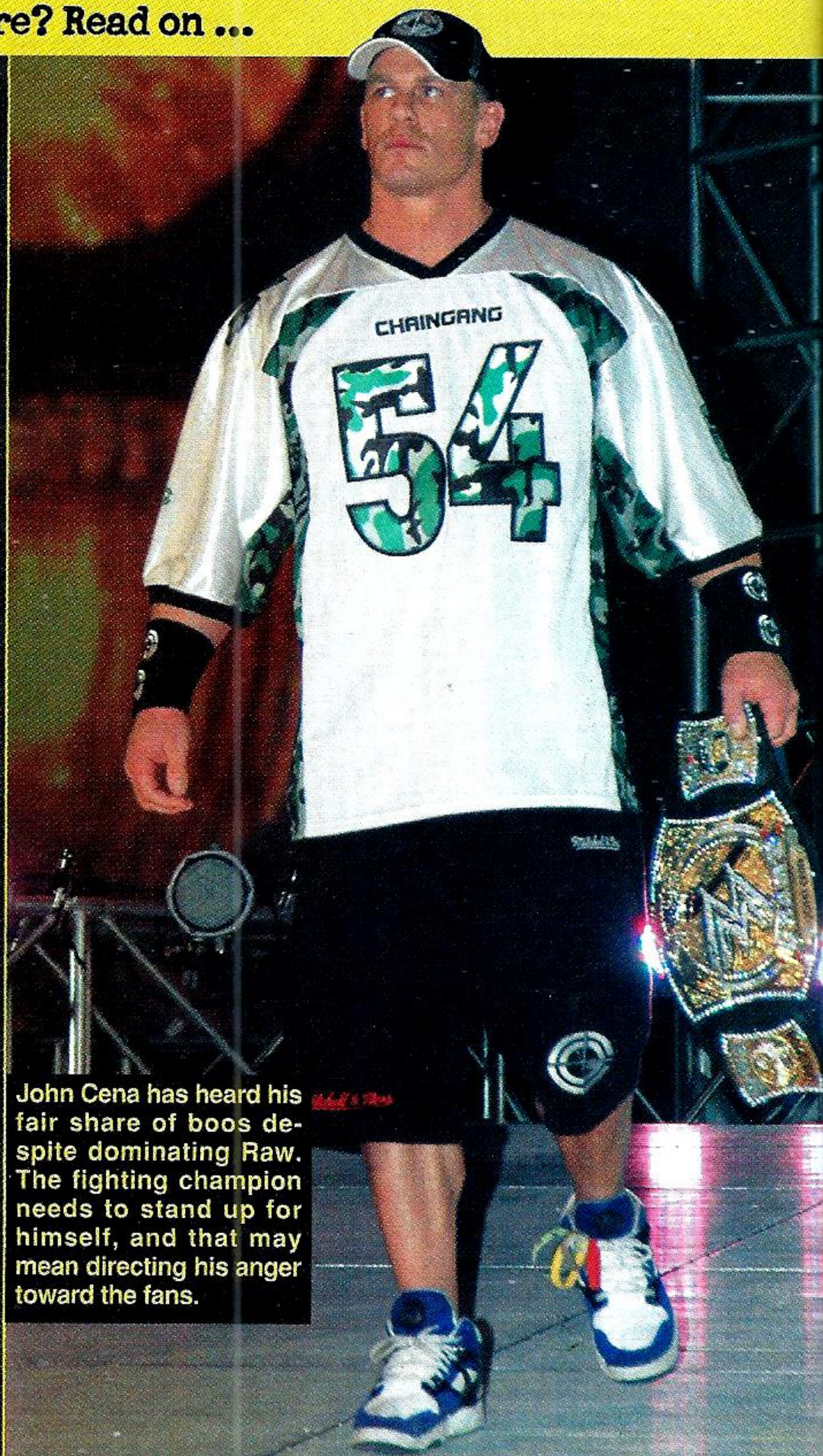
Every sport needs stars, and there's never a shortage of them in wrestling. Are the stars featured most prominently today accomplishing everything they should be accomplishing? Could they do even more? Read on ...

ONE OF THE most fascinating things about putting together our annual "State Of The Stars" section is coming up with the names to be analyzed. It gives us all an interesting look at how the sport has changed in 12 months. While it's true that a high percentage of the sport's top performers remain among the elite for years at a time, we only look at those wrestlers we consider the *elite* of the elite for these pages. And that elite changes more than you might think from year to year.

Would you believe that only five of the 14 wrestlers we spotlighted last year at this time are back in 2006? Quite a bit has changed for these five (Triple-H, John Cena, Kurt Angle, Randy Orton, and The Undertaker).

But let's look at the nine who didn't make the cut again for a moment. First there's JBL. Sure, he became U.S. champion at WrestleMania 22, but how much is that title worth anymore? A year ago, he was just coming off a shockingly dominant run as WWE champion. Next is Jeff Jarrett. The unthinkable is happening with Jarrett in TNA. He's becoming a forgotten man. Well, almost. Then there's Batista, who's hoping WWE will still have huge plans for him once he finally gets healthy again.

There's also Trish Stratus, who is getting upstaged by the psychotically lovely Mickie James. And it may not be his fault, but Chris Benoit's star has faded a lot in the last 365 days as well. At least he's still having terrific matches when he can. The Big Show has become something of a bit player and tag team specialist. A.J. Styles is as phenomenal as



John Cena has heard his fair share of boos despite dominating Raw. The fighting champion needs to stand up for himself, and that may mean directing his anger toward the fans.

ever in the ring, but a lot of other TNA stars are getting a lot more attention than him these days.

Jeff Hardy made our "Stars" list in 2005, and he's barely a professional wrestler at all now. Finally, we wish Eddie Guerrero could still be placed on this list.

If it sounds like this section is being set up to be a bit of a downer, fear not. That isn't the case at all. The sport has to be in pretty decent shape if new stars keep emerging and warrant inclusion here. Rey Misterio Jr. is atop the Smackdown roster. Samoa Joe is changing TNA and maybe the sport as a whole. Carlito has a huge upside with Raw. Edge has shown he can be a terrific main-eventer; ditto for his little "brother" in TNA. We even make a case for the next year being among the most interesting of Triple-H's career. The stars are shining brightly. So let's get to it.

Just as we did last year, we begin our analysis by taking a look at the champions of Raw, Smackdown, and TNA as they stood at press time.

JOHN CENA

John Cena had to have been a little disappointed at the end of WrestleMania 21. Sure, he won the WWE title cleanly from JBL. He got to celebrate with ringside fans. His time atop his half of WWE had finally come. But his victory was overshadowed by Batista's win over Triple-H for the World title. WrestleMania 21 was great, but it could have been so much sweeter.

But heck, things were going to get *much* better for him over the next year, right?

Well, yes and no. Save for a three-week interruption courtesy of Edge, he reigned as WWE champion all the way through WrestleMania 22, at which he beat Triple-H cleanly. That was fantastic.

That's only part of the story, however. Despite his dominance of the Raw brand from summer through spring, the man who was supposed to be the most popular wrestler in WWE became one of the most hated—by a lot of fans at least. He got booed by male fans in arenas from coast to coast. Sure, he had and still has his share of loyal Chain Gang members. But the majority of the WWE fan base made it clear that they're not ready to embrace Cena. The profane chants he heard at WrestleMania 22 in Chicago made that clear. He had to be wondering what he had done so wrong.

Make no mistake, Cena is still going to be one of WWE's top heroes—and probably sooner than you think. All the

WWE champion has to do is turn against those fans that have betrayed him. He needs to do it violently and nastily. Within a few months, he'll earn a lot of respect. Fans will see he really does have an edge to him. Then they'll be ready to love him. And maybe all will be right in WWE again.

REY MISTERIO JR.

Little Rey-Rey has a chance to change the sport ... *again*. He did his share to change it when he first arrived in the States to wrestle for ECW and then later in WCW. He forced American promoters to take smallish wrestlers seriously as top stars and even drawing cards.

Now, thanks to his "do-it-for-Eddie," feel-good World title win at WrestleMania 22, he has earned a chance to open Vince McMahon's eyes.

See, it was only two years ago that McMahon entrusted Chris Benoit and Eddie Guerrero—two smallish, athletic wrestlers—to carry the banner for WWE. The "Era Of The Technical Wrestler" in WWE had begun.

Or maybe not.

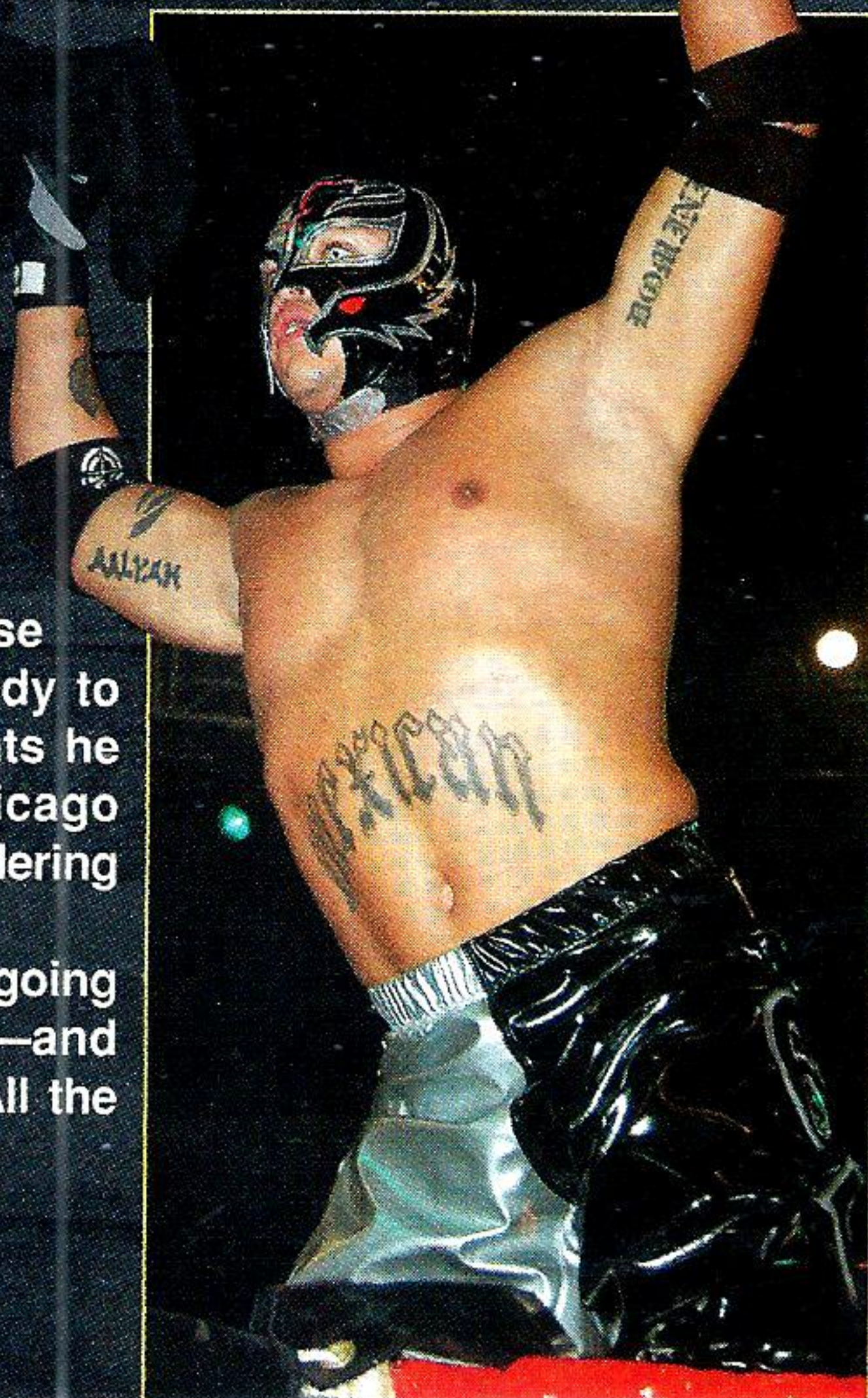
Since then, McMahon has revisited his obsession with bigger and usually more musclebound wrestlers. JBL, Triple-H, John Cena, and Batista have dominated. Chris Masters and Bobby Lashley have gotten big pushes. Now Rey could change a lot of that. McMahon probably didn't envision Misterio as a long-term World champion after WrestleMania 22. But if *Smackdown* ratings start to climb and fans buy in to Misterio as champ, Vinnie Mac might just be convinced that a change in direction is in order.

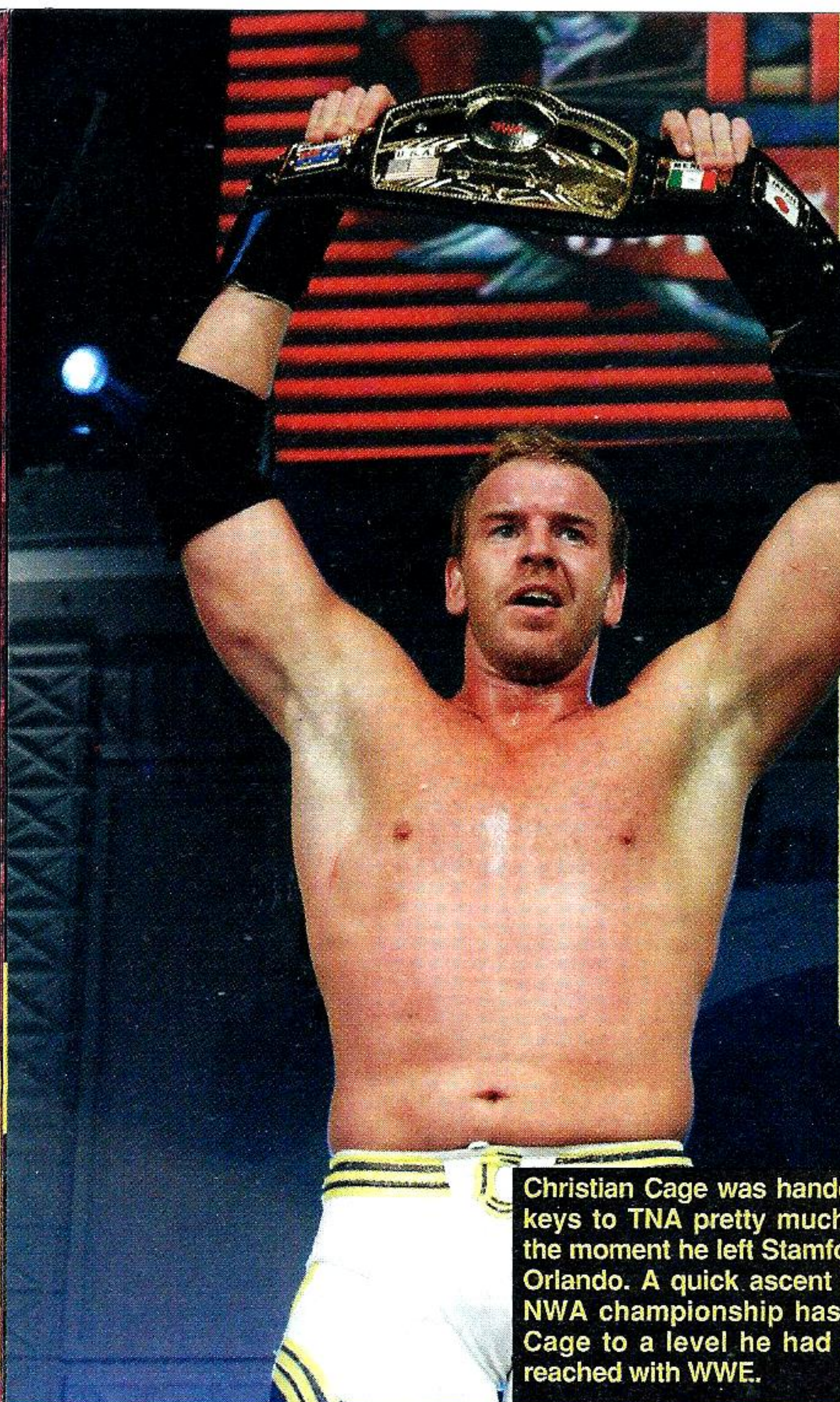
Of course, if this doesn't happen, Misterio shouldn't feel bad. Because, as of April 2, 2006, he had accomplished just about all any man could hope to accomplish in this business. The fact that he stands all of 5'3" makes that feat all the more amazing.

CHRISTIAN CAGE

This former *C.L.B.* sure has had a great last six months, hasn't he? He was just another long-suffering, underrated WWE mid-carder last summer. True, he had a great upside, but WWE

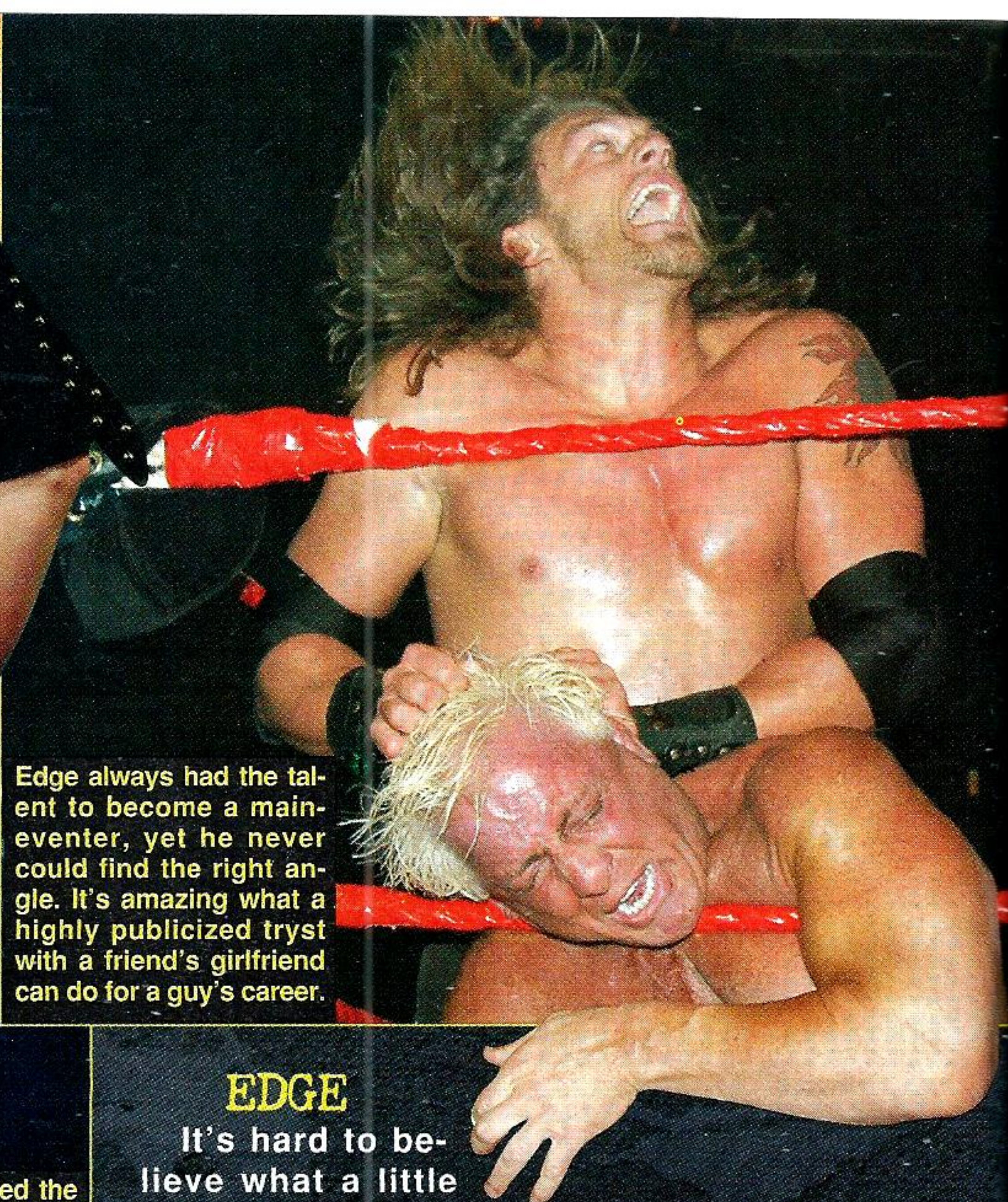
Could WWE be headed in a new direction where wrestling acumen is given greater value than a bulky physique? Probably not, but Rey Misterio Jr.'s unlikely reign as World champion should be celebrated as the "feel-good" moment it was intended to be.





Christian Cage was handed the keys to TNA pretty much from the moment he left Stamford for Orlando. A quick ascent to the NWA championship has lifted Cage to a level he had never reached with WWE.

Edge always had the talent to become a main-eventer, yet he never could find the right angle. It's amazing what a highly publicized tryst with a friend's girlfriend can do for a guy's career.



EDGE

It's hard to believe what a little real-life tryst with Lita has done for Edge's career. It's not that WWE wasn't planning on giving him his shot at main-eventing for Raw anyway. But his affair with Lita and subsequent feud with her former real-life boyfriend, Matt Hardy, gave him an edge (sorry) that allowed him to form an astoundingly strong connection with WWE fans. They really hate him and Lita for what they did to poor Matt, but they really sank their teeth into his "Rated R Superstar" persona.

Edge was so reviled that he got a brief run with the WWE title in January. We're not the only ones who would have liked to have seen it last longer. Raw ratings jumped when he upset John Cena, and WWE seemed just a little fresher with him on top. But Cena-Triple-H was meant to be the money match at 'Mania this year, and so it was. Thus, Edge slipped out of the title picture and into a hardcore feud with Mick Foley. He excelled at that, too, and beat the hardcore legend in a gruesome encounter at 'Mania.

With Cena likely being forced to turn heel, Edge could easily end up going the fan favorite route. Now that WWE fans have seen his darker side, they might respect him enough to start cheering him if given a chance. It might work, but the feeling here is that Edge has huge potential as a heel. He could have a lot more to show us than he offered in feuds with Hardy and Cena (and he showed quite a lot in those). A turn to the fan favorite side might kill a lot of the momentum he has built up over the last year and

seemed totally uninterested in exploiting it. So when it came time to sign a new deal, Christian took a look at the WWE document, thought it over, and pushed it back across the table unsigned. A few weeks later, he was a member of the TNA roster. A few *months* later, he was NWA heavyweight champion and showing he had the talent to be a main-eventer.

No matter what happens from here, Christian will always be able to say he was the first big-name star to choose to jump from WWE to TNA even though he had a WWE offer on the table. That's the good news.

The bad news—well, not really *bad* news—is that the next year could make or break it for Mr. Cage. The next year will tell us whether he has it in him to be one of the sport's elite stars for a sustained period of time. Jeff Jarrett, Steve Borden, Monty Brown, Samoa Joe, and Rhino are just five of the other stars likely to be challenging for the NWA title.

We love Christian's ring skills, his microphone skills, and his charisma. TNA would be wise to continue to use him at or very near the top of the card, regardless of how much Mr. Borden is getting paid. We're betting that 2006 will turn out even better than 2005 for him. Betting and hoping.

dull that edge a bit (sorry again). It's not always so easy to regain lost momentum.

Let's hope that the last year doesn't turn out to be the high point of Edge's career. Let's hope he can build on it.

KURT ANGLE

It seems like we've been telling you that Kurt Angle's days as a full-time WWE wrestler are winding down for as long as we've been telling you that Ric Flair probably has one more run at the top left in him. (Unofficially, we've been telling you the latter since 1993, six years before Angle made his WWE pay-per-view debut.)

Truth is, Angle continues to struggle physically. He tries to hide it, but it's true. It's also true that he's not thinking much about retirement yet. He probably should be, but he isn't.

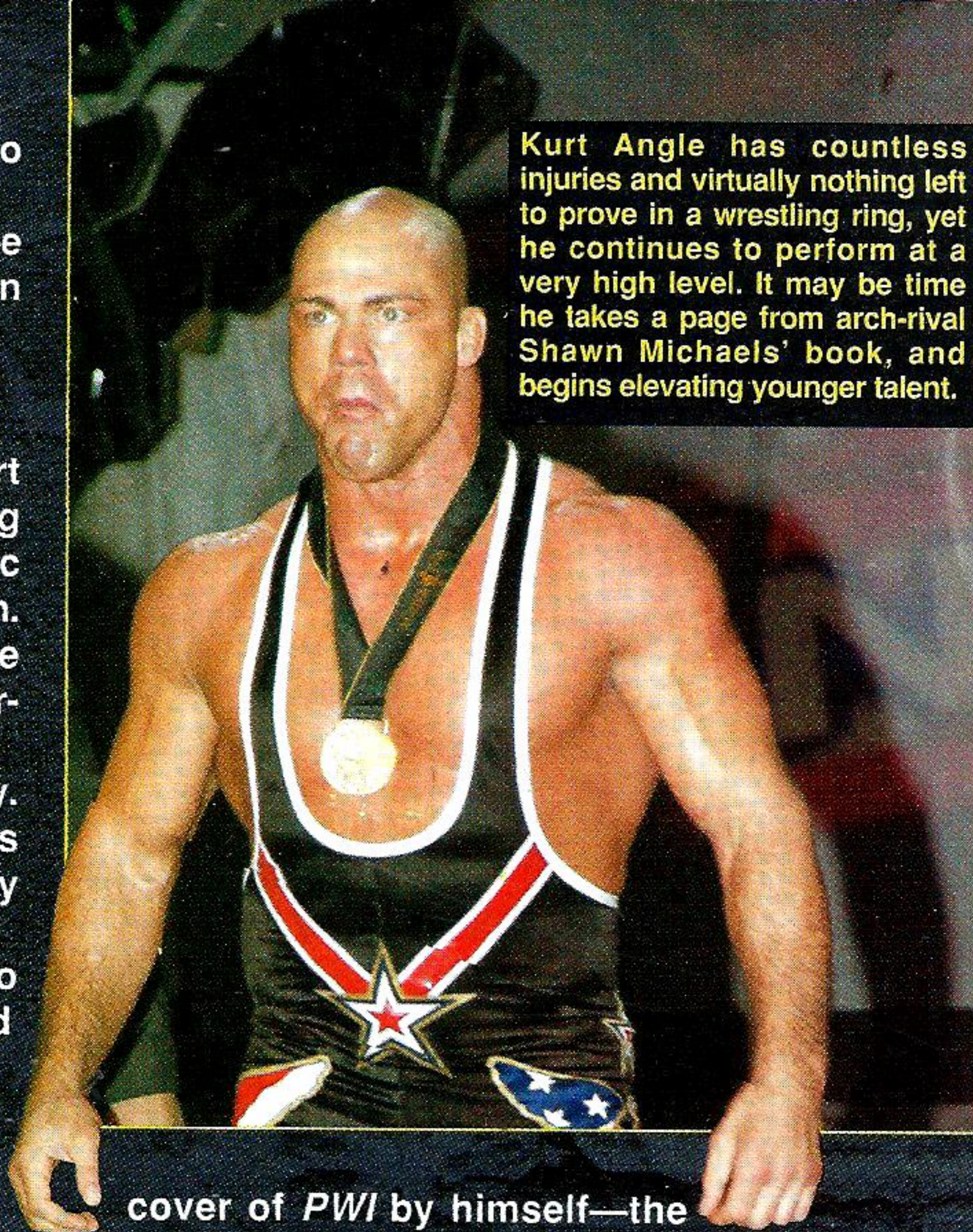
Still, we all should appreciate what Angle brings to WWE every night he's in the ring. And we should savor every big match he gives us as if it's the last.

Our Olympic hero doesn't really need another World or WWE title reign to add to his resume. His last reign, which ended at WrestleMania 22, wasn't all that noteworthy. He was his usual consistently excellent self in the ring, but it just kind of felt like he was keeping the title warm for the next guy. Of course, he only won it after Batista had to give it up, and he conveniently found a contractual loophole that allowed him to jump from Raw to Smackdown.

Rey Misterio Jr. turned out to be the man for whom he was keeping it warm. Angle could very easily win the belt again and do a fine job with it. At this point, however, he could be most valuable to WWE as a superstar who could do a Foley-like job of elevating an up-and-comer to a much higher level. That's right, it should be Angle's job to make a fellow former amateur great into a main-eventer. Step right up, Mr. Lashley.

SAMOA JOE

TNA higher-ups still aren't quite sure what to make of "The Samoan Submission Machine." Oh, they know he's a special, somewhat unorthodox athlete with the potential to change the sport. (Just the fact that we made Joe the first TNA wrestler ever to grace the



Kurt Angle has countless injuries and virtually nothing left to prove in a wrestling ring, yet he continues to perform at a very high level. It may be time he takes a page from arch-rival Shawn Michaels' book, and begins elevating younger talent.

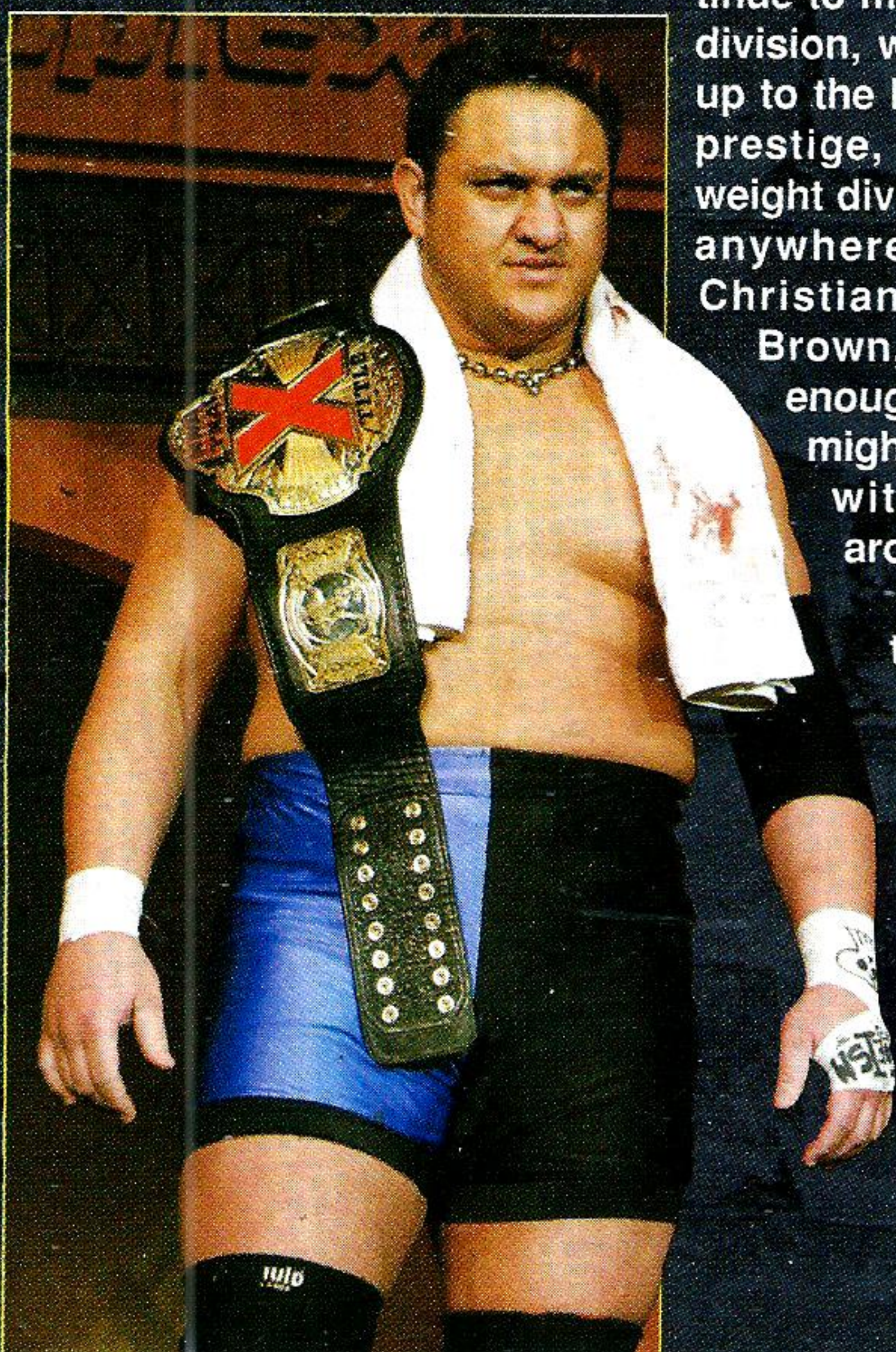
cover of *PWI* by himself—the May 2006 issue in case you haven't gotten your hands on a copy yet—has to make him special, right?)

But just how special is he? His matches with A.J. Styles and Christopher Daniels have been beyond spectacular. Even when he loses one of those, he doesn't really lose. His loss of the X title, remember, took place in an "Ultimate X" match, in which pinfalls and submissions don't count.

The dilemma TNA faces now is whether to continue to make Joe the centerpiece of the X division, which is slowly starting to catch up to the heavyweight division in terms of prestige, or to shift him to that heavyweight division and see if his style meshes anywhere near as well with those of Christian Cage, Steve Borden, Monty Brown, and Jeff Jarrett. Joe is good enough to be the face of TNA, but he might not ever be able to fill that role without the NWA belt strapped around his ample waist.

Our sense is that, as great as those matches with Styles and Daniels have been, it's time for Joe to take that next huge step

Samoa Joe's meteoric rise in TNA has been largely attributed to his innovative ring technique as well as a cult fan following stemming from his days on the independent circuit. An NWA title run may not be out of the question for the X division champion.



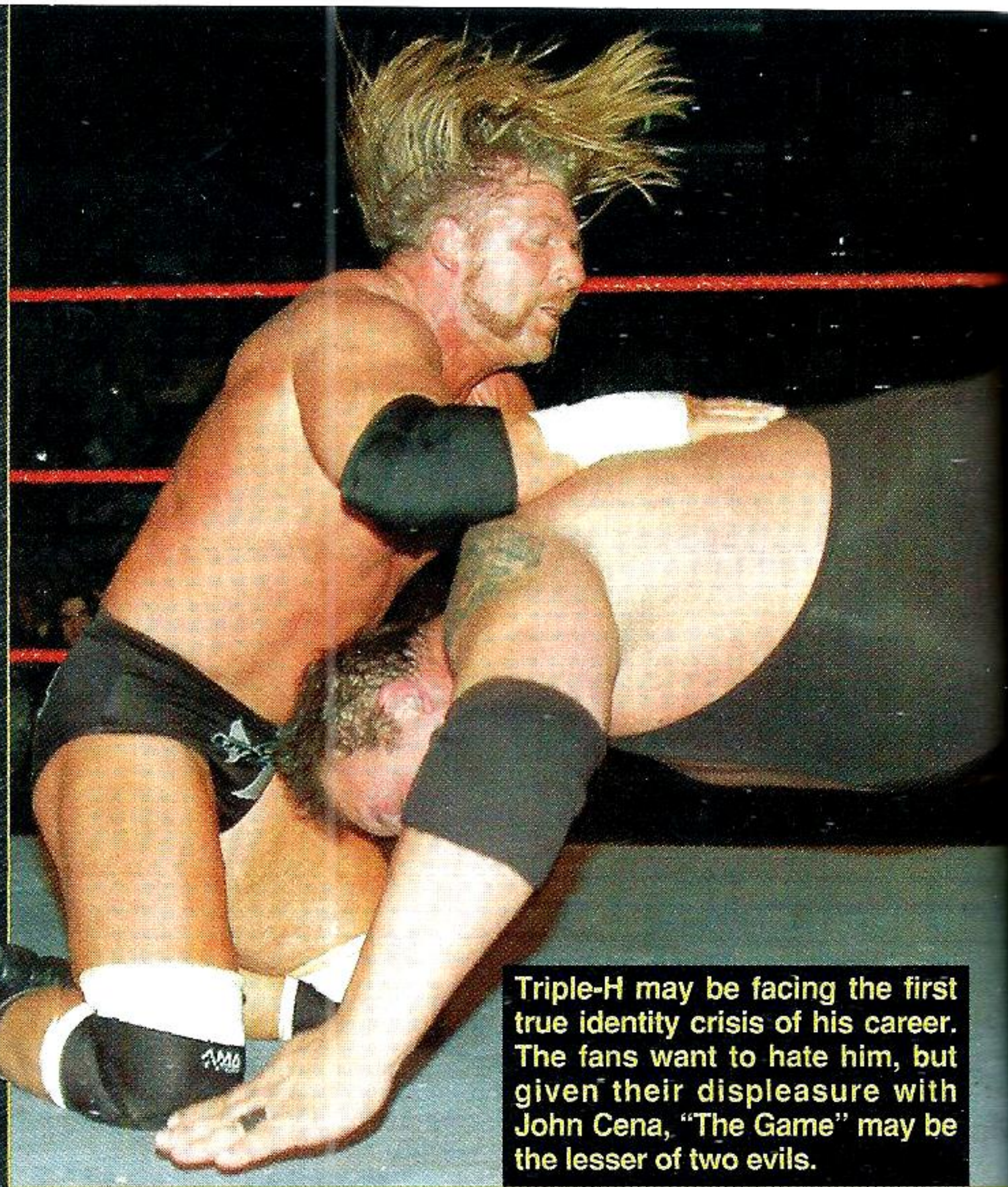
and find some new opponents to tear apart with his unusual, hard-hitting style. Joe will be ready to be NWA champion by the end of 2006, and he still might not have a pinfall loss on his TNA resume by then. In fact, it would be best if he didn't. You can be sure he's quite happy that he didn't pursue a deal with WWE.

TRIPLE-H

"The King Of Kings" ought to thank John Cena. That is, if he isn't busy trying to upstage him or smash him with his omnipresent sledgehammer.

See, here's a news flash for you: "The Game" had been growing stale in the last few months. His feud with Cena was one of those that, on paper, looked like it should have been huge—perfect for the main event of WrestleMania. But as the build continued week after week leading up to April 2, it just didn't feel that way. Instead, it felt like one of the more underwhelming 'Mania main events in quite a few years. The match itself turned out to be decent enough. What made it so interesting, though, was the crowd reaction. Most of the 17,000-plus in Chicago were sure they wanted to boo Cena, but they weren't totally sure they wanted to support Triple-H. The same thing happened the next night on *Raw*, also from Chicago. They weren't sure how to greet Triple-H, but by night's end, he was hearing mostly cheers against Cena. Triple-H didn't seem to know exactly how to handle the crowd reaction, either.

All of a sudden, his usual routine of doing everything he could to make everyone loathe him wasn't relevant. He got off some good one-liners against both Cena and Edge, as if he wanted the crowd to cheer him. This volatility at the top of *Raw* cards is just what Triple-H needs. He needs to be challenged to try something different. It will only make



Triple-H may be facing the first true identity crisis of his career. The fans want to hate him, but given their displeasure with John Cena, "The Game" may be the lesser of two evils.

him a better and more interesting wrestler. A fan favorite turn might work for him, or perhaps he'd be best suited to a role in which he really isn't a true babyface or heel. Anything but the status quo is an improvement at this point. For the first time in quite a while, we're not quite sure what to make of "The Game." That's a very, very good thing, indeed.

THE UNDERTAKER

Not since 1993 has the outcome of an Undertaker WrestleMania match been less in doubt (and where have you gone, El Gigante Gonzales?). Did you think Mark Henry stood any chance of handing 'Taker his first 'Mania loss in 14 outings when they locked up at WrestleMania 22? Do you know anyone who did? Neither do we.

As is the case with Shawn Michaels, WWE Creative is running out of ideas for "The Dead Man." That being noted, he's done about all he can to keep himself from stagnating. Years ago, he moved away from the old "Dead Man" persona, transformed into a more evil sorcerer type, then evolved into the motorcycle-riding "American Badass." Then, when the time was right, he eased back into his original "Dead Man" gimmick, only with a more modern repertoire of moves/holds (he's a big UFC fan).

We've about given up trying to predict when UT will hang up the singlet. He appears to be in the best shape he's been in over the last five or so years.

The Undertaker continues to amaze even in the latter stages of his legendary career. Infrequent appearances have allowed the "Dead Man" to prolong his career while still delivering excellent matches.

His stamina may not be what it once was, but he remains one of the most marketable wrestlers on the WWE roster and a star whom thousands pay to see. He doesn't need gold around his waist at this stage of his career, which is why you seldom see him challenging for the World or WWE title.

It's funny that as 'Taker continues to re-embrace his original WWE persona, WWE is shifting him back into a role he filled so well early in his WWE tenure—that of the big, tough hero who faces down and ultimately buries all the big, tough baddies. Mark Henry got his at WrestleMania, and next up on UT's docket was the debuting Dalip Singh. Count on the "Dead Man" continuing to win a lot more than he loses at this advanced stage of his career. Given that he works a less-than-full-time schedule now, perhaps this stage will last quite a bit longer.

CARLITO CARIBBEAN COOL

A lot of people were a bit miffed when Carlito and Chris Masters failed to win the World tag team title from The Big Show and Kane at WrestleMania 22. We were among them. It's not that Triple-C and Masters were a better team, but logic dictated that Show and Kane would lose simply because there wasn't much for them to accomplish as a team. Carlito and Masters were more entertaining.

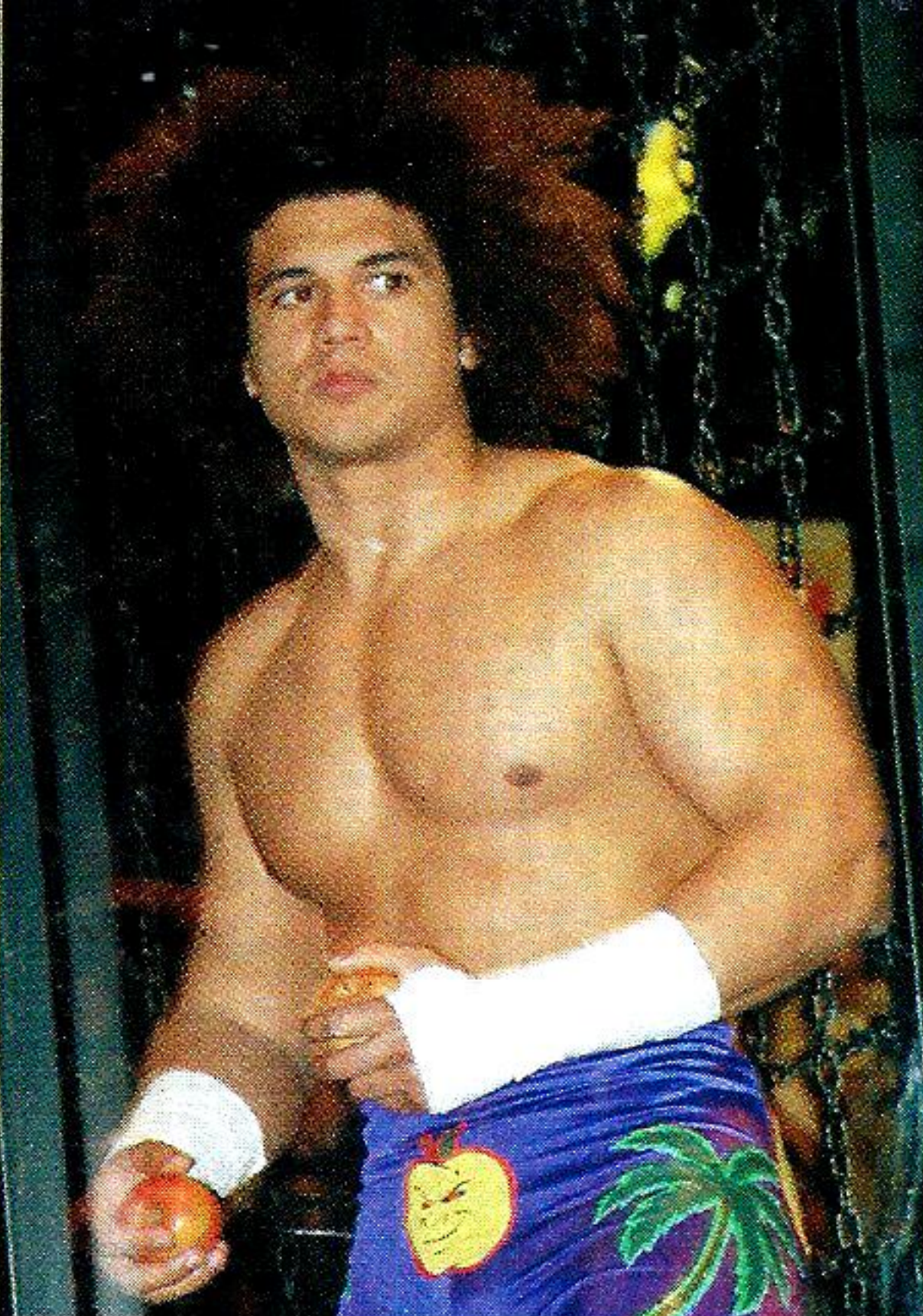
Yet they lost—and then watched as the lightly regarded Spirit Squad took the gold just a night later.

It all began to make sense, however, when Carlito sneak-attacked Masters, whose mistake cost them the belts—and got cheered wildly for it.

If you haven't figured it out already, let us be the first to tell you that Carlito has huge potential as a fan favorite. He was terrific as a heel, but that had run its course. He'd insult his foe of the moment in an entertaining way, probably spit apple in his face at some point, and inevitably get his butt kicked by said foe.

His insults seem fresher now. He has a little—make that a *lot*—of that famous old WWE Attitude in him now, and he'll be more confident in the ring with people cheering him. Admit it, you'd been thirsting for a reason to cheer him for a while.

Carlito isn't ready to carry Raw, plus there are a lot of others still higher than he is in the pecking order. But give him a year to gather momentum as a babyface and upgrade his repertoire of moves, and he just might become part of the WWE championship mix.



It may be time to take Carlito Caribbean Cool out of his packaging and officially make him part of the Raw elite. Fans who have been dying to cheer for the apple-spitting prankster may get that opportunity this year.

RANDY ORTON

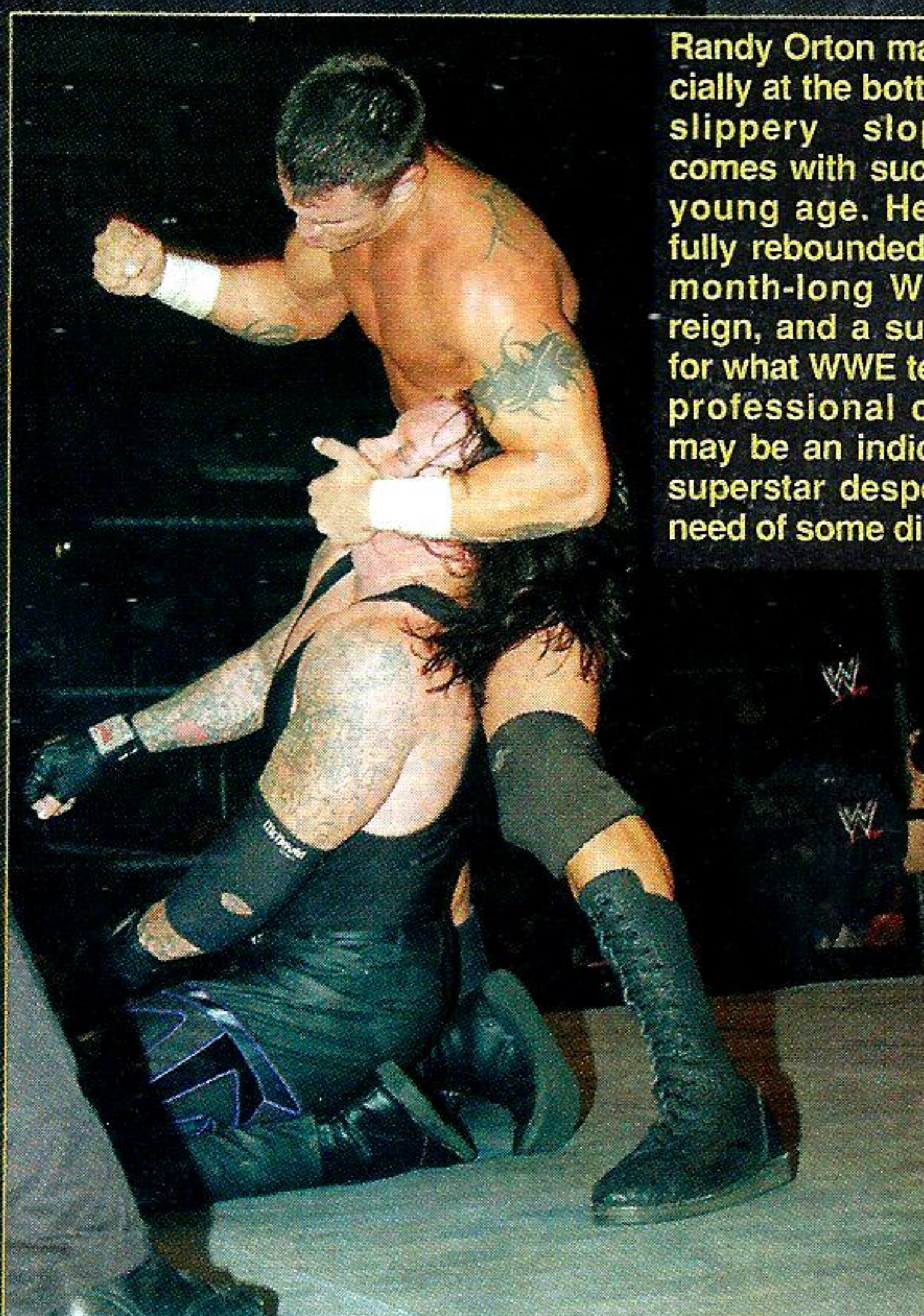
It'd be interesting to know just how Randy Orton feels about his former running buddy, Triple-H ... just how he *really* feels.

It's been close to two full years now since Triple-H violently booted Orton out of Evolution for having the unmitigated gall to win the World title from Chris Benoit before "The Game" could do it himself. He still hasn't fully recovered from that burial. Four weeks later, Triple-H won the title from Orton, who fizzled fast as a fan favorite. Soon Batista emerged as the former Evolution member whom fans wanted to get behind. Orton's tentatively scheduled 'Mania 21 match

with Triple-H went to Batista, and then injuries killed off what little momentum Orton had left.

He didn't fare particularly well in a too-long feud with Undertaker and was pretty disappointing in his three-way match for the World title with Kurt Angle and Rey Misterio Jr. at WrestleMania 22. Two days after that, he was suspended for 60 days for unprofessional conduct.

There's still a world of talent, athleticism, and charisma inside the body of this third-generation star. It's just that he doesn't look like the blue-chip prospect he seemed to be back in 2004. In fact, we're beginning to fear that 2004 will go down as the best year of his career. A lot of wrestlers would give a lot



Randy Orton may be officially at the bottom of the slippery slope that comes with success at a young age. He's never fully rebounded from his month-long World title reign, and a suspension for what WWE terms "unprofessional conduct" may be an indicator of a superstar desperately in need of some direction.

to have one year like that, but Orton could have done so much better. He still has a few years before he turns 30, so maybe he still will, but it feels like our confidence in him has been RKO'd.

ROB VAN DAM

So much for the first WWE-produced ECW pay-per-view turning around RVD's career, huh?

His injured knee didn't allow him to wrestle at One Night Stand I, but he did cut the best promo of his career and hinted that he'd be speaking his mind in his promos in the future and that he wouldn't be tossing out any more "Whatever, dude"-type lines.

It didn't help that it was another half-year before he returned to the ring. When he did return, it was a trip right back to the mid-card ranks. Good, athletic matches against other good, athletic mid-carders and not much promo time. Same old, same old.

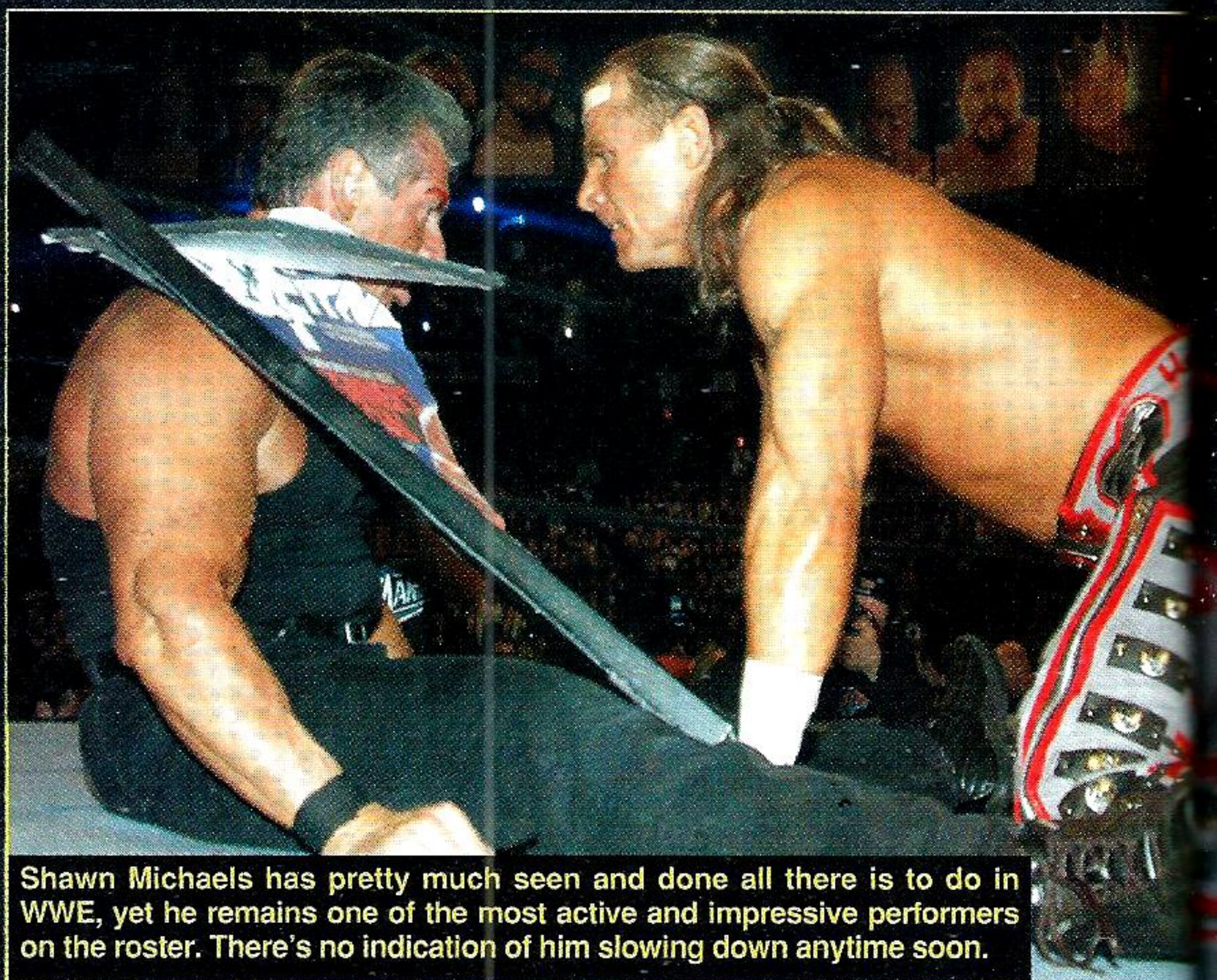
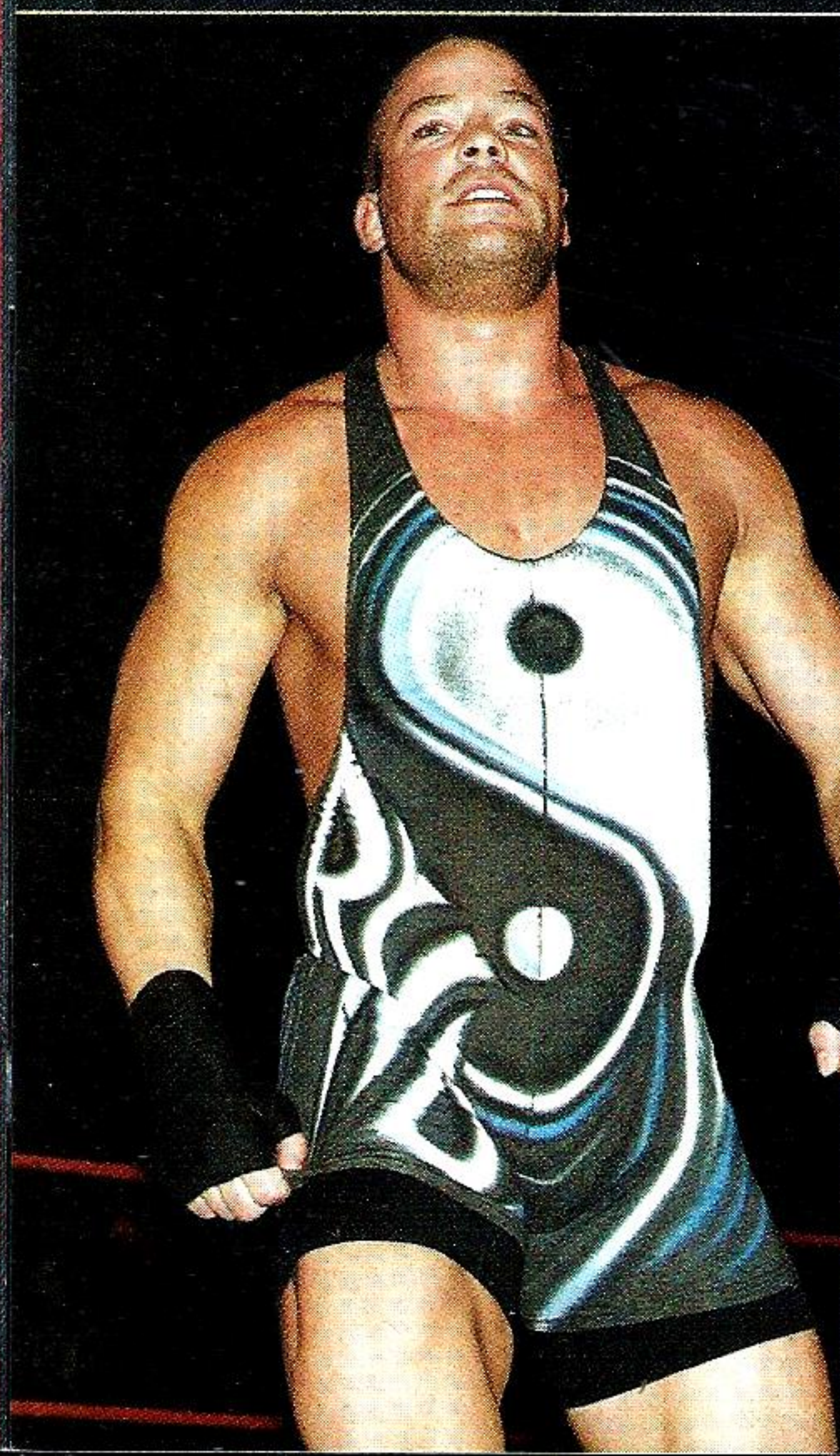
Hold on a second there.

We still believe Van Dam would make a fine WWE champion. It might be risky to elevate him to that level, but it'd be a gamble worth taking for WWE, locker room politics be damned.

Don't think for a second that his "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder match win at WrestleMania 22 was insignificant. We all remember how Edge made his win in that match at WrestleMania 21 count. At press time, rumor had it that Van Dam would be cashing in his WWE title match at ECW One Night Stand II. It'd be hard to imagine RVD losing at that show, wouldn't it?

Essentially what we're telling you is that this truly could be the year RVD finally breaks through and wins a world champion-

Rob Van Dam took his sweet time returning from knee surgery, only to win the "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder match at 'Mania, and guarantee himself a shot at the WWE championship. With a second ECW pay-per-view taking place in June, this may be the RVD's last best chance to win WWE world gold.



Shawn Michaels has pretty much seen and done all there is to do in WWE, yet he remains one of the most active and impressive performers on the roster. There's no indication of him slowing down anytime soon.

ship. What we're also telling you is that if he does, he probably won't be able to look forward to a long reign, whether he deserves his shot or not. We have a feeling that no matter what happens in 2006, five years from now, we'll still be lamenting what a shame it was that WWE just didn't understand all that Van Dam had to offer.

SHAWN MICHAELS

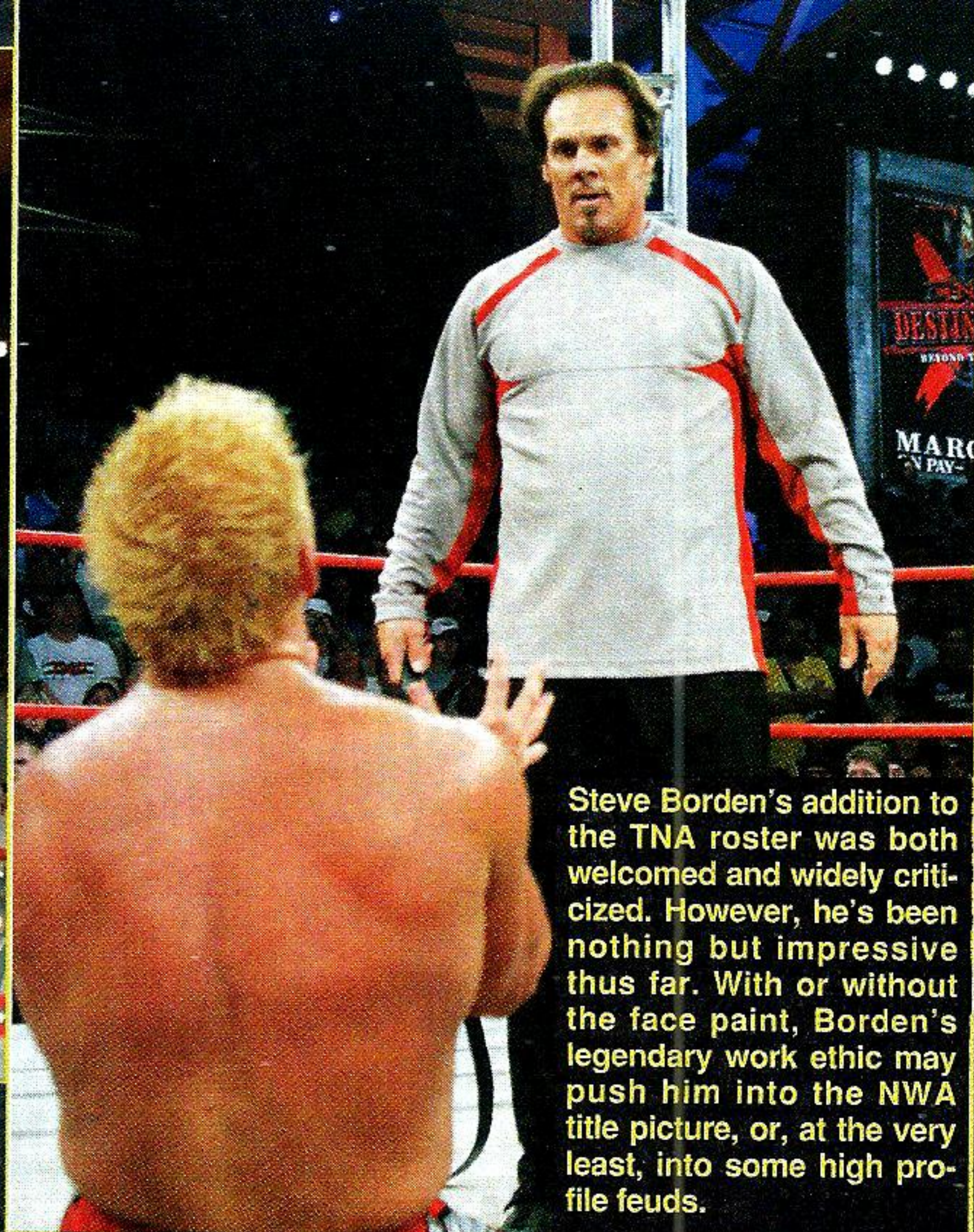
It's not necessarily a good thing to get sucked into a huge feud with Vince McMahon. Not in the year 2006 anyway. Sure, in 1996, it was cutting-edge stuff. Steve Austin made a career out of feuding with Vinnie Mac. In 2006, however, it's a sure sign that Creative is running out of good ideas for you.

Don't be so quick to judge Creative this time. Shawn Michaels has done it all. He's won every title worth winning in WWE (except for the WWE title currently held by John Cena), feuded with most of the big names in the game now and many that aren't around anymore, and been a great heel *and* a great fan favorite. He's also turned in six *PWI* Matches of the Year.

That doesn't mean he can't do some big stuff again: Another MOTY; help to elevate another young star or two; win another big gold belt.

The state of Shawn Michaels in 2006 is every bit as good as it's ever been. He can still damn near have a good-to-great match with any opponent in WWE (and heck, maybe even some of the referees and ring attendants if that's what he's asked to do).

Although HBK and Vinnie Mac aren't exactly getting along these days, Vince does appreciate what Michaels brings to his company. We're just not sure he *fully* appreciates him. Michaels ought to have another World or WWE title run or two left in him, and this could be the year he gets the gold back and



Steve Borden's addition to the TNA roster was both welcomed and widely criticized. However, he's been nothing but impressive thus far. With or without the face paint, Borden's legendary work ethic may push him into the NWA title picture, or, at the very least, into some high profile feuds.

runs with it for a while. And the fact that he's dusted off the old DX crotch crop a few times suggests he might be ready to freshen up his act a bit, which is great news.

STEVE BORDEN

It still feels odd to call the man formerly known worldwide as Sting by his given name.

There was a lot about which we all could have been skeptical when TNA announced it had changed the face of wrestling by signing Borden to a lucrative deal at the end of last year. He was five years older than he was when he had last called himself a full-time wrestler, plus his character was beyond stale even back in WCW in 2001. His occasional appearances in TNA in its formative years gave zero indication that he was doing anything but going through the motions and collecting a paycheck. Sting had a chance to be a huge bust in TNA in 2006.

Apparently, the TNA brass knew better than most of us in this case.

Borden doesn't seem stale at all anymore. By showing fans the man behind the makeup and ditching at least some of the old Sting mannerisms, he seems fresh, motivated, and genuinely excited about what he's doing. He's more interesting to watch

than he has been since he first took to the rafters to psych out the NWO a full decade ago. Hell, if you can make Jeff Jarrett interesting in 2006, you're doing a wonderful job.

We're not quite sure Borden is a great candidate to be NWA heavyweight champion just yet, but we're not entirely convinced he's not, either. We do think TNA will give him his shot, though. Potential feuds with Christian, Samoa Joe, and Abyss—just to name three TNA regulars—have us quite intrigued as well. Who could have predicted that Sting—er, Steve—would even be wrestling regularly in 2006, let alone be one of the featured performers on our "State Of The Stars" list. Should we give him the 2006 Comeback of the Year Award now? Probably.

BOBBY LASHLEY

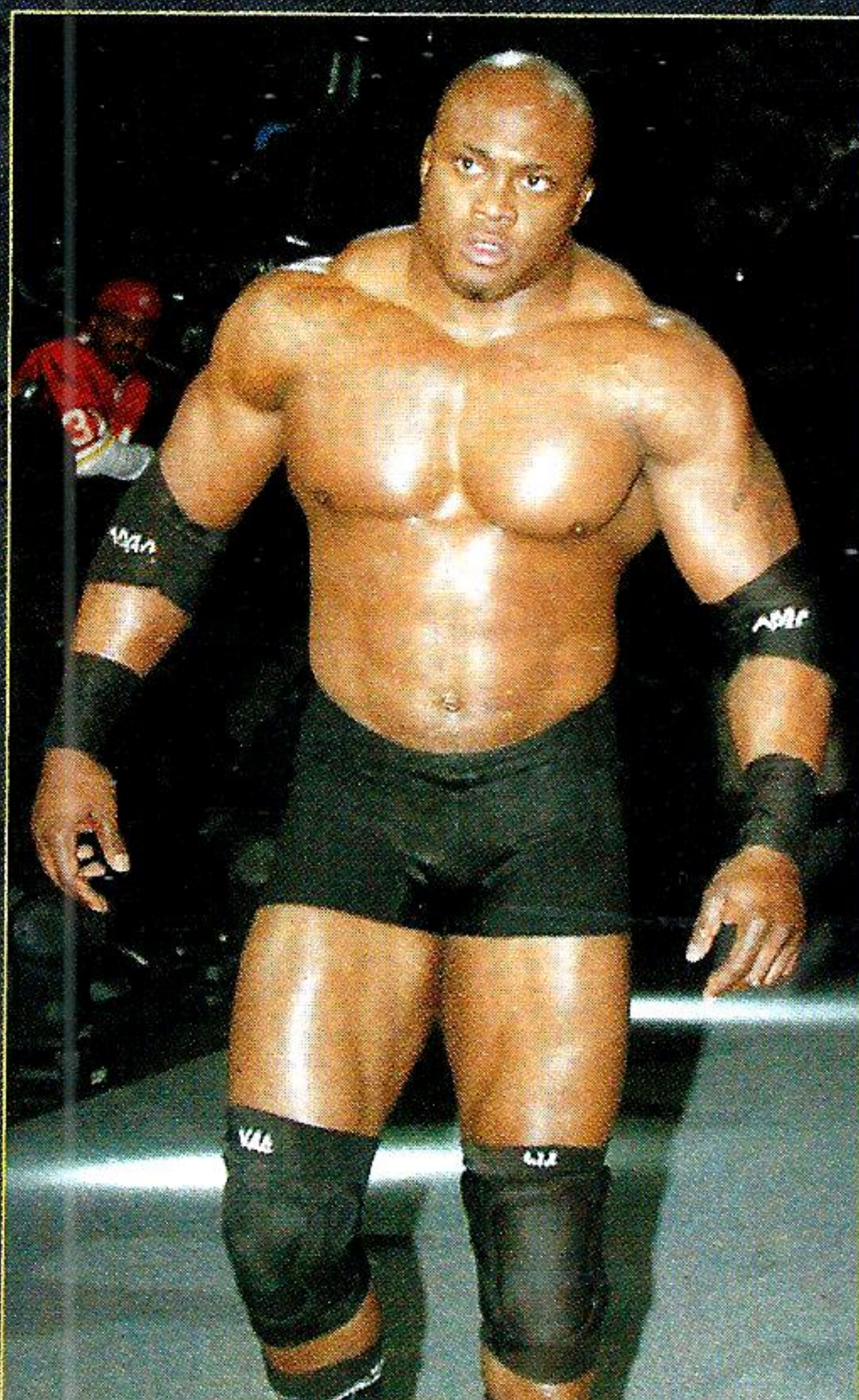
It was only about year ago that Lashley seemed to be on the fast track from OVW to WWE superstardom. Or least the moderately paced track. He was fed a number of the lower-rung Smackdown wrestlers, all of whom he devoured. But soon he was going to get a big-time foe placed across the ring from him, and in Goldberg-like fashion, he'd destroy him and advance directly to WWE title contention.

We're still waiting for that.

Lashley has been moved out of the fast lane. Struggling against JBL and Finlay (*Finlay?*) will do that for you. Someone important in WWE must have decided that Lashley's great look, intimidating physique, understated charisma, and amateur wrestling credentials aren't impressive enough. Sure, he earned a spot in the interbrand "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder match at WrestleMania 22, but we barely noticed him after his entrance.

It is likely that WWE still has some pretty big plans for Lashley. Maybe it just wants to see to it that the big man doesn't get a big head just yet. The look is still great, the physique still intimidating, and the amateur credentials still impressive, so we have to believe his time in the spotlight is coming, and probably sooner rather than later. We still believe he's a future world champion. And we still believe his climb to the top should begin in earnest with an explosive feud opposite Kurt Angle. □

Bobby Lashley is arguably the brightest star on the WWE roster, although the company may be bringing him along too slowly. A high-profile feud with a bona fide main-eventer—like Kurt Angle—would elevate Lashley to the level the fans expect him to soon attain.



STATE OF THE ART

This past year wasn't the greatest for fans of technical wrestling, at least not those fans that remain loyal to WWE. But WWE clearly has its way of doing things, and there were bright spots. In TNA and elsewhere, the state of the art was much better

TO GAUGE THE state of the art of wrestling as we approach the midpoint of 2006, it would no doubt be helpful to look back at our assessment of said art as of the middle of 2005. So without further ado, let's revisit some of the key points we made last year:

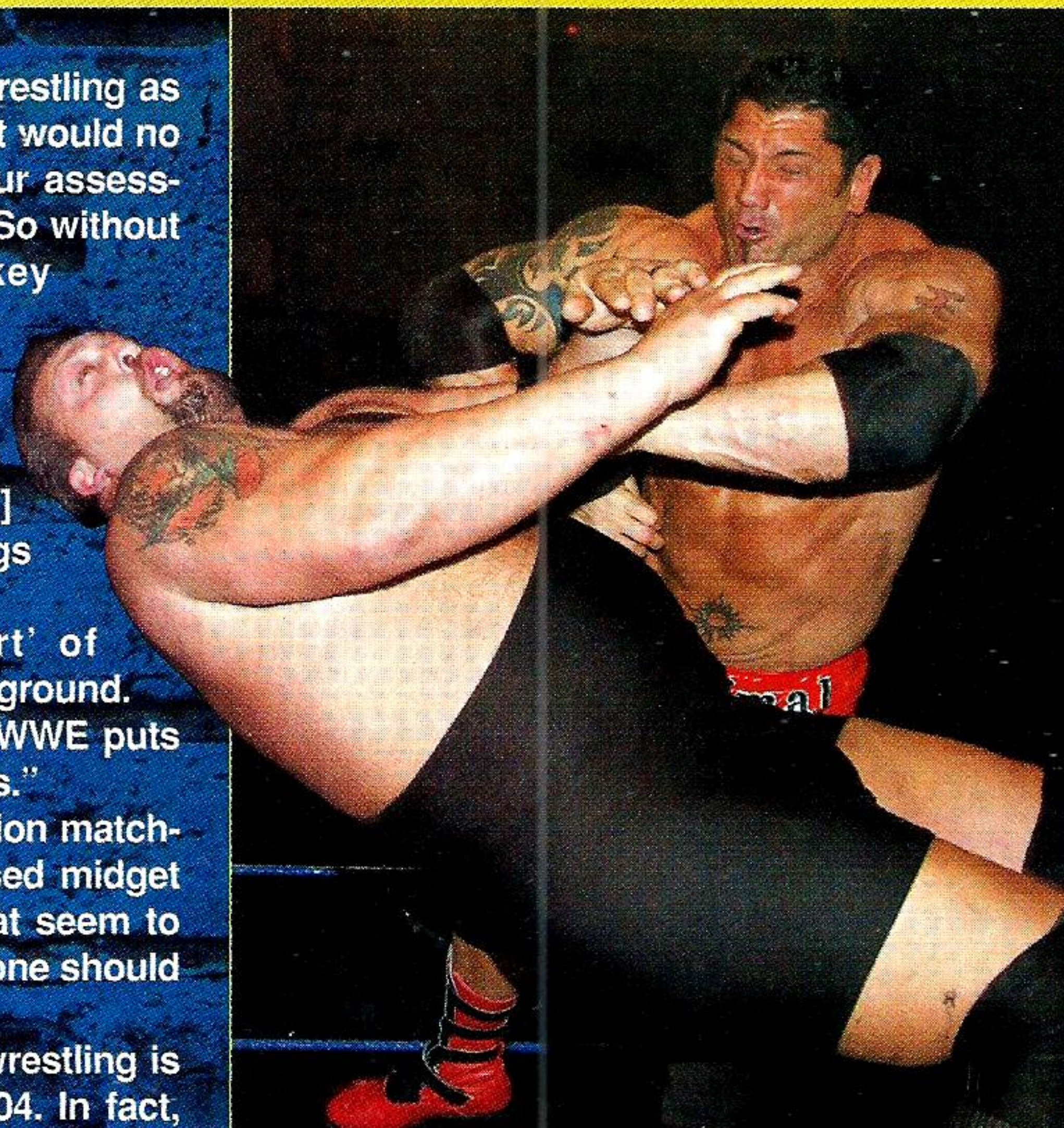
- "Although it certainly could be debated, WWE management believes JBL has done a better job as a world champion than either [Chris] Benoit or [Eddie] Guerrero, as *Smackdown* television ratings have been gradually improving."

- "Those who salivate over the 'art' of wrestling have mostly taken refuge underground. They take pride in rejecting a lot of what WWE puts forth and try to build up their own new stars."

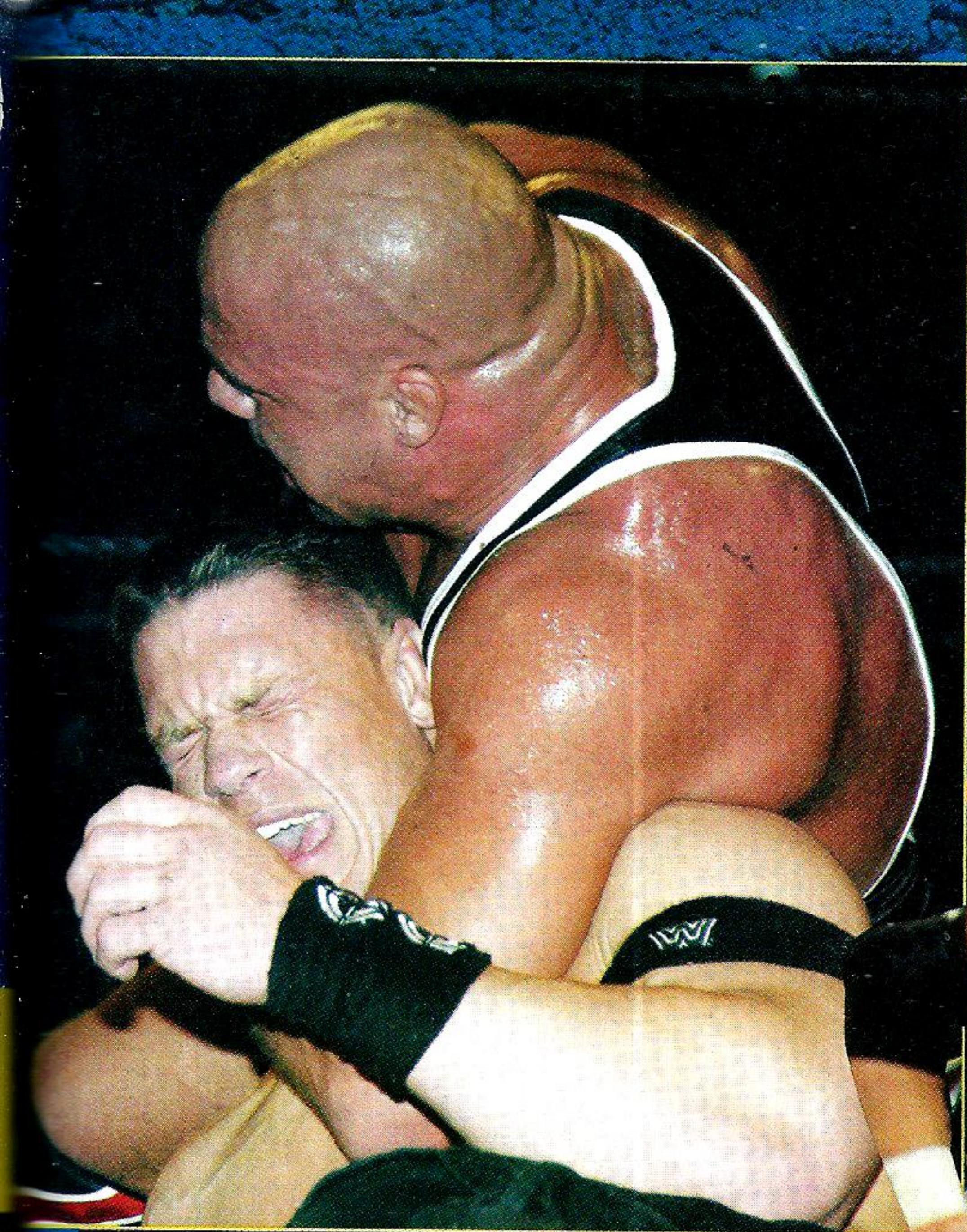
- "At times it feels like TNA uses X division matches the way promoters in an earlier era used midget matches: They're nice little diversions that seem to entertain the fans, but they're nothing anyone should take too seriously."

- "So, basically, what we call the art of wrestling is in worse shape in 2005 than it was in 2004. In fact, history might show 2004 to have been sort of a watershed for the technical wrestling movement, a point it could take years to reach again."

Well, that's a lot to digest, even a year later. We're here now to explain to you that a few things have



Even the tag teams were made up of behemoths in 2005. At one point The Big Show and Kane held the World tag team title whereas Batista teamed with the diminutive Rey Mysterio Jr., and held the *Smackdown* straps. WWE has yet to stray too far from its time-tested formula of pushing big men despite their lack of in-ring prowess.

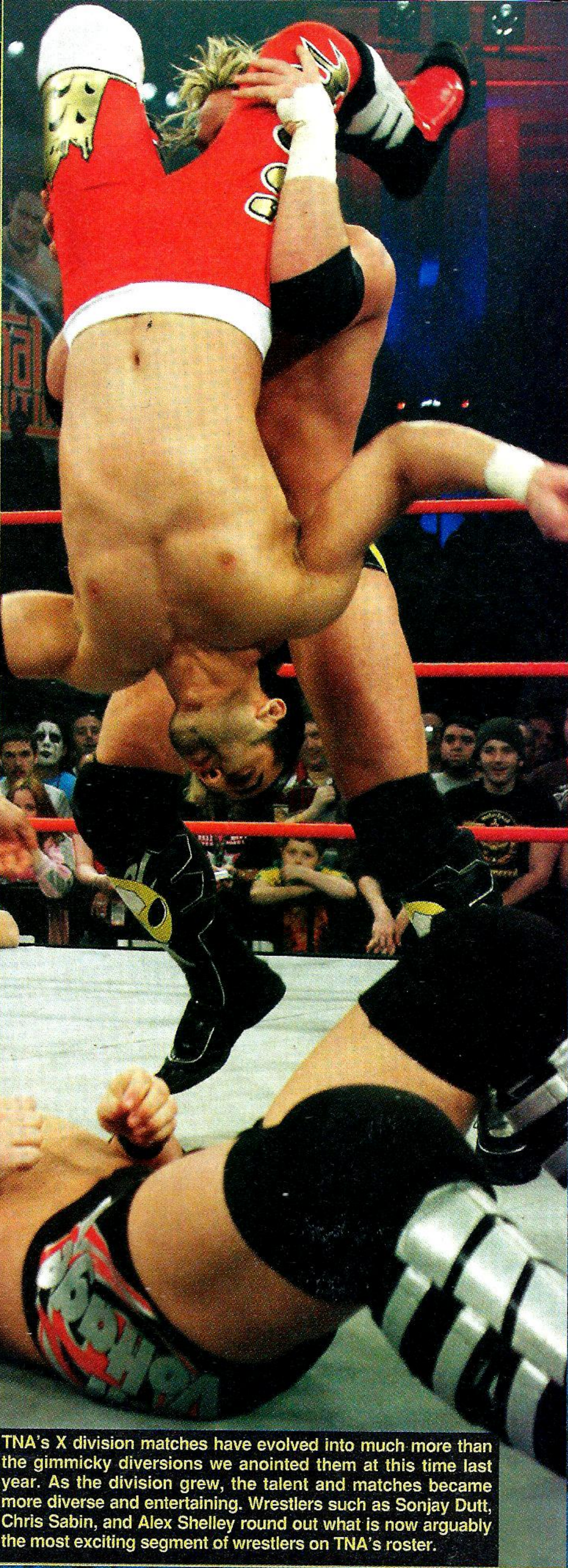


What was once referred to as a veteran "carrying a match" with a younger, more inexperienced wrestler could now be considered an on-air training session. Kurt Angle schooled John Cena for the better portion of 2005. Placing budding superstars into feuds with established talent allowed wrestlers like Cena to gradually improve their technical wrestling skills while maintaining a presence on WWE programming.

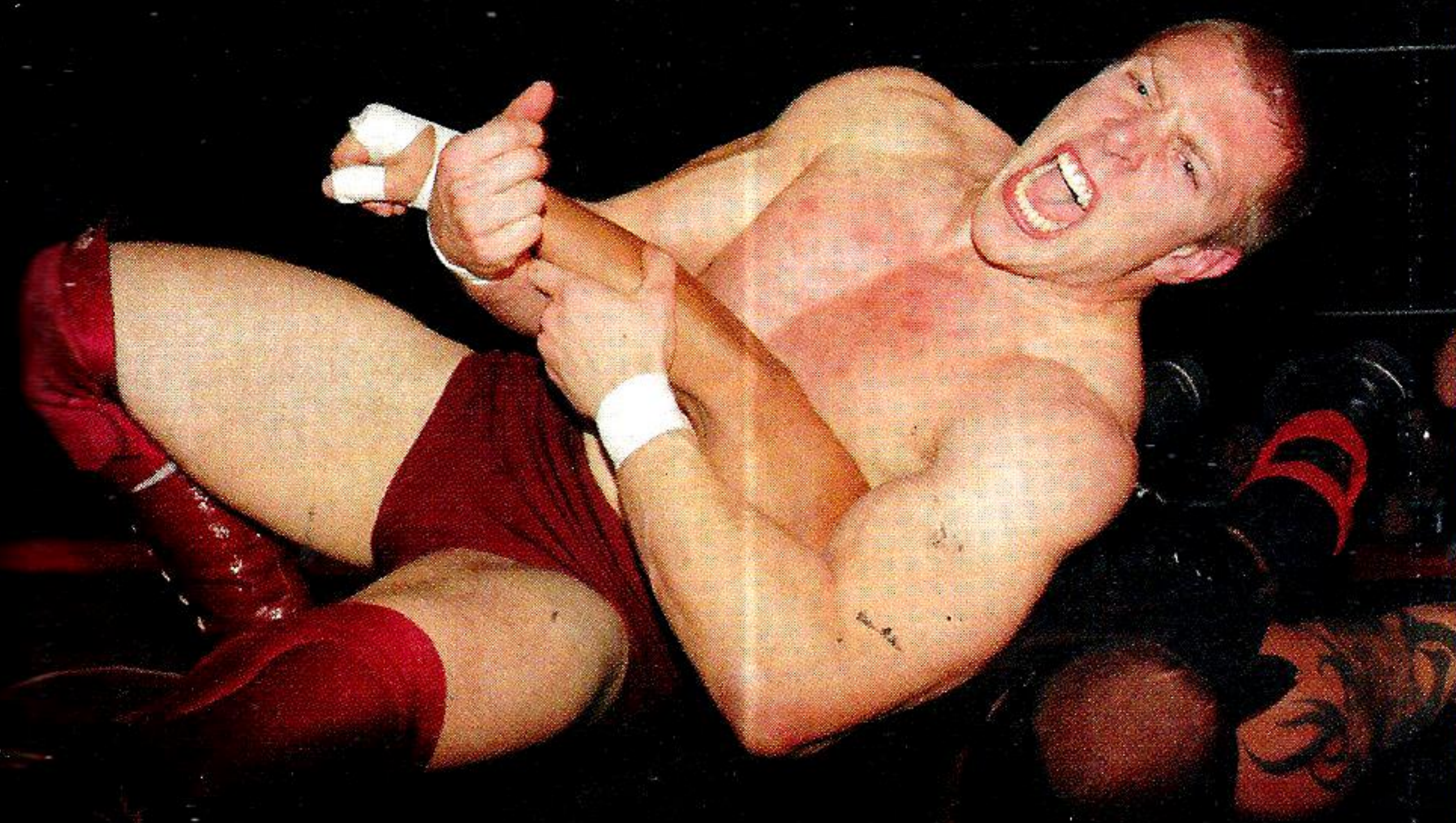
changed—some even for the better. And some things have stayed the same—some for the worse.

Obviously, this discussion of the state of the art of wrestling has to begin with WWE. Returning to that first key point from 2005, Vince McMahon clearly still believes the big boys (in most cases) are the ones who sell tickets and pay-per-views. JBL didn't rule Raw or Smack-down for even an hour over the last 12 months. But look at who did: John Cena and Batista. Anyone remember a single four-star technical masterpiece from either? But as we also noted last year, Bruno Sammartino and Hulk Hogan weren't much for technical wrestling, and they both ruled the company for years and sold *millions* of tickets.

In 2006, McMahon is steadily clinging to the notion that drama, great characters, hype, and good story-



TNA's X division matches have evolved into much more than the gimmicky diversions we anointed them at this time last year. As the division grew, the talent and matches became more diverse and entertaining. Wrestlers such as Sonjay Dutt, Chris Sabin, and Alex Shelley round out what is now arguably the most exciting segment of wrestlers on TNA's roster.



There may be no better place to examine the true state of the art of professional wrestling than at promoter Gabe Sapolsky's Ring of Honor. A rotating talent roster, headlined by mainstay and ROH champion Bryan Danielson, allows the promotion to showcase various wrestling styles, all of which are technically solid and tremendously entertaining.

Samoa Joe, Christopher Daniels, and A.J. Styles for that. Their matches were so good, so innovative, and so unpredictable that management had almost been forced to put their bouts on last for some of the PPVs. It was just asking too much for those in the NWA heavyweight title match (which is usually the main event) to try to follow them. With Petey Williams, Roderick Strong, Jay Lethal, Sabu, and others salivating over the chance to get back in the X title mix, there's no reason to believe the artistry will decline anytime soon.

Even better news is the fact that those aforementioned heavyweights seem determined not to be

underrated in this facet of the game), and comedy. Plus it has a legitimate and deep tag team division!

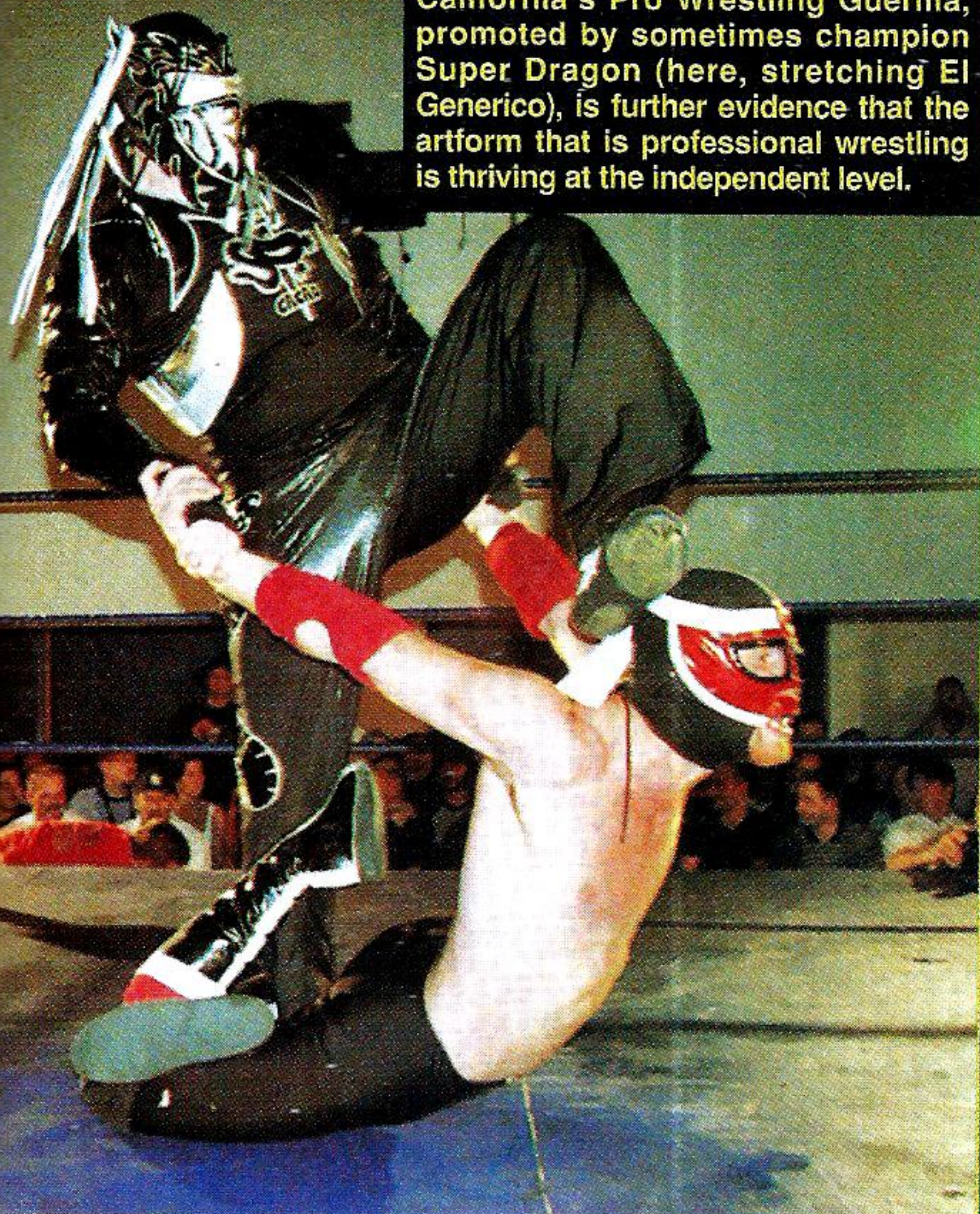
So is it still necessary to burrow underground to find those exciting new stars? Not really, but it's not a bad idea to check out what's down there. Ring of Honor, of course, remains the most high profile of the independents, and you'll still find no shortage of great matches in that promotion. One key to ROH's success is the fact that promoter Gabe Sapolsky has learned to make the most of the fact that a lot of its stars leave for bigger arenas and paychecks with more zeroes to the left of the decimal point. What better way to keep the action fresh than by constantly changing the roster?

A company once dominated by Low-Ki, Samoa Joe, and A.J. Styles now gives us more steady doses of current champ Bryan Danielson (perhaps the world's most underrated technical wrestler), Nigel McGuinness, Roderick Strong, and some of the latest and hottest exports from Japan. And that's not to mention a surprisingly entertaining interpromotional feud with Combat Zone Wrestling.

Of course, those who attend Full Impact Pro cards in Florida, IWA Mid-South shows in the Midwest, or cards of any number of indies in California—perhaps the best known being Super Dragon's Pro Wrestling Guerilla—will tell you that the art of wrestling is in no trouble at all on the grassroots level.

That leaves us with only the most important of questions to answer: Is the art of wrestling in worse shape in 2006 than it was in 2005? Well, that's a difficult one to answer. It depends on what show you're watching on a given night. It's, by no means, a lost art. But there's work to be done at the highest level to at least ensure that it isn't lost in the future. □

California's Pro Wrestling Guerilla, promoted by sometimes champion Super Dragon (here, stretching El Generico), is further evidence that the artform that is professional wrestling is thriving at the independent level.



STATE OF THE BUSINESS

WWE executives aren't obsessed with improving pay-per-view buys or live-event attendance. Instead they have devised more innovative ways to separate fans from their money. TNA should follow their lead



Photo Courtesy of USA Network

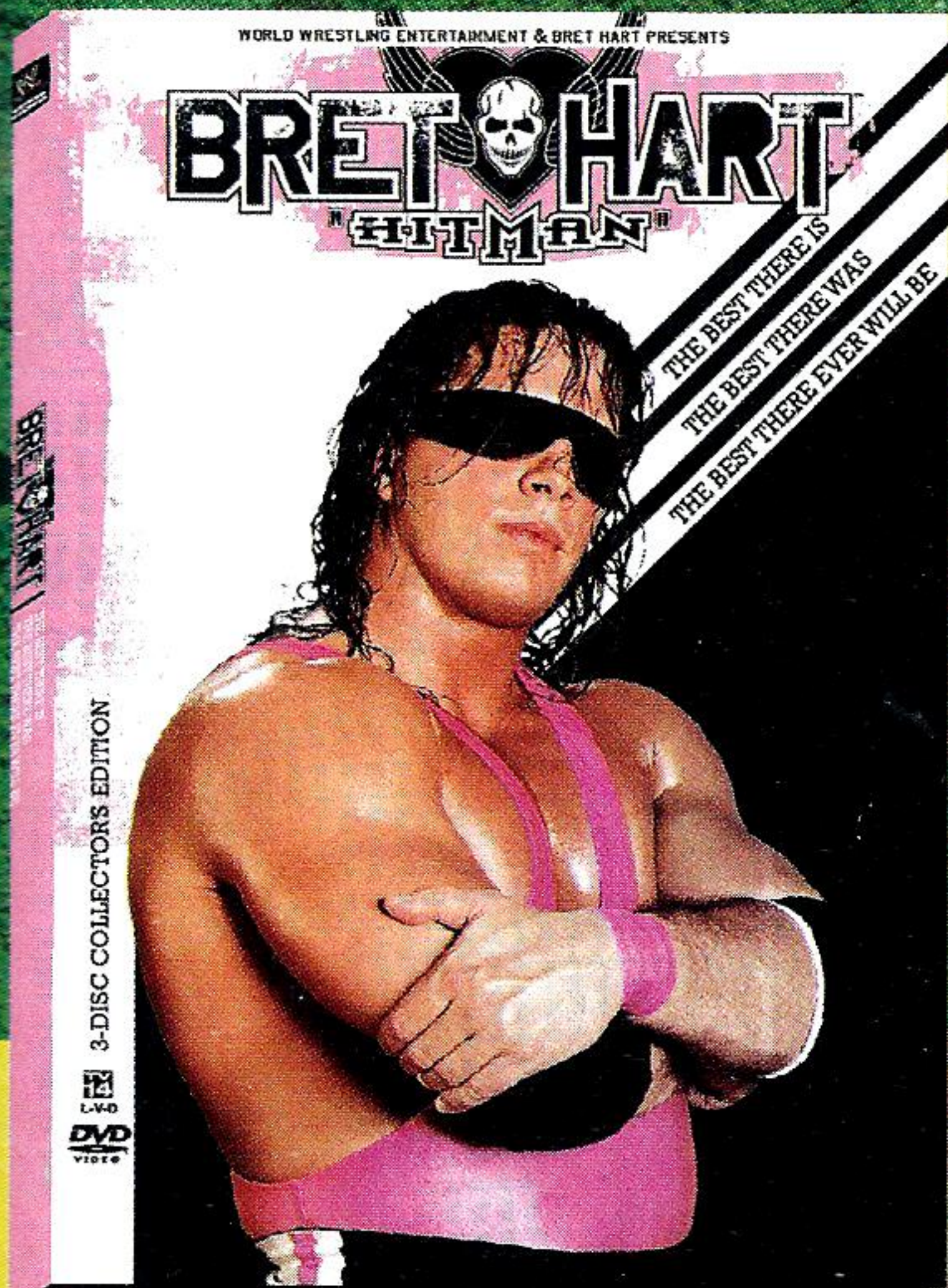
"IF YOU'RE IN this business for anything other than money, you're nuts."

That is a quote attributed to the late Gorilla Monsoon. While most people weren't literally hanging from the rafters to seek advice from the 400-pound legend, Monsoon—as a wrestler, company official, and announcer—knew money fueled pro wrestling, like any other business. Money is a motivator, money is power, and money forces people to set aside differences and cooperate for the sake of making more of it.

As of 2006, is there money in the wrestling business? Yes, but most of it is in the coffers of WWE. In fact, the long-lamented wrestling recession that began in 2001 is over. Attendance at WWE live events is still down, yet the company is devising many more platforms to make money. House shows, which used to be lifeblood of the industry, have become supplemental income.

Although live events are an important indicator of interest in the product, and international tours generate significant revenue, WWE is mastering how to make money off of fans without having to lure them into arenas. Pay-per-views have been part of that strategy for 20 years. At WWE headquarters, there is a host of executive vice presidents, each working on a different facet of the company's growth plan. Basically, all of these corporate departments are working on concepts that can deliver the WWE product to fans in ways that are more

Getting back into bed with USA Network was a wise maneuver for Vince McMahon (seen here sealing the deal with Bonnie Hammer, president of USA). Since January 2005 and USA's subsequent October reacquisition of WWE programming, WWE's profits have risen 67 percent.



WWE anthology DVDs have been a wildly successful moneymaker for the company. The Bret Hart career anthology DVD was successful due to the former champion's cooperation with Vince McMahon during the project. Other legends, such as The Ultimate Warrior and Jake Roberts, have not been so graciously honored.

innovative, convenient, and lucrative.

Thanks to the brand extension, WWE is producing more pay-per-views per than ever before. Its Web site, wwe.com, is ranked 450th in traffic among the millions of Web sites worldwide. What other portal boasts so much Web-exclusive programming? There is *Heat*, *Velocity*, and *Unlimited*, WWE's sneak peek at backstage happenings during *Raw* and *Smackdown* commercial breaks. Nowhere else on the Web—not at cnn.com and not at msn.com—is there so much fresh video material.

A couple of years ago, WWE experimented with the video-on-demand market by offering the *Fanatic* series, featuring profiles of various superstars. Now it has a permanent presence: WWE 24/7. In addition to its own collection spanning over 40 years, WWE has purchased nearly all of the important video libraries in wrestling history, including those of WCW, ECW, the AWA, Jim Crockett Promotions, Championship Wrestling From Florida, World Class Championship Wrestling, and other promotions.

WWE 24/7 is parsing out select footage on a rotating basis and is already set to premiere its first original program, *The Legends Of Wrestling*, featuring old-timers swapping war stories in roundtable dis-

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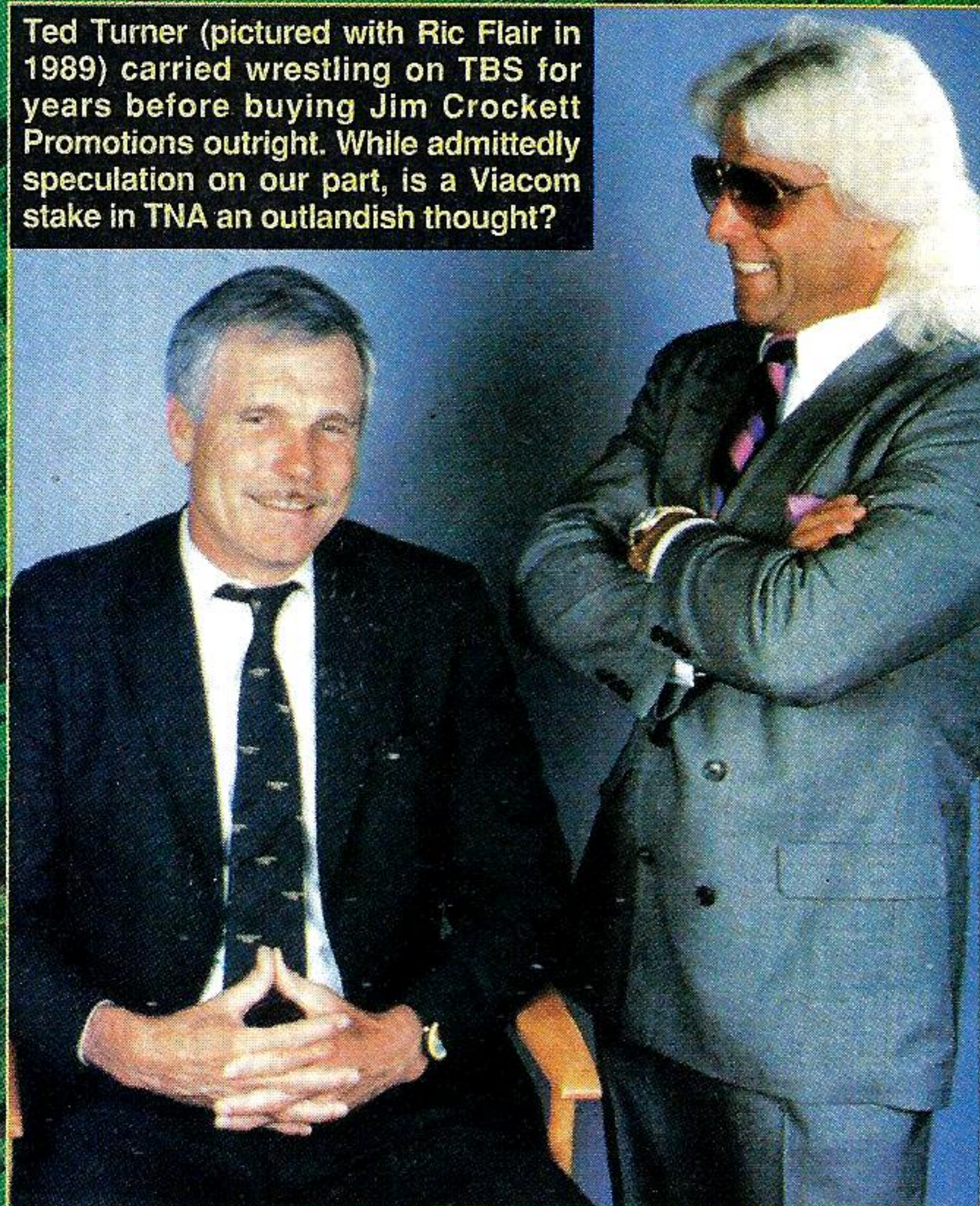


Sports entertainment meets feature film with the release of Kane's big screen debut in *See No Evil*. Preliminary plans were in the works at press time for films starring Steve Austin and John Cena.

cussions. This past year, several DVD compilations have utilized this footage, including *Bret "Hitman" Hart: The Best There Is, Was, And Ever Will Be*; *The Self-Destruction Of The Ultimate Warrior*; *Pick Your Poison: The Jake Roberts Story*; and *Twenty Years Too Soon: The "Superstar" Billy Graham Story*.

Clearly, WWE's growth strategy embraces the

Ted Turner (pictured with Ric Flair in 1989) carried wrestling on TBS for years before buying Jim Crockett Promotions outright. While admittedly speculation on our part, is a Viacom stake in TNA an outlandish thought?



"three I's": integration, interactivity, and innovation. Tom Barreca, executive vice president of WWE Enterprises, has been tasked with integrating all of this archival material into various platforms, including VOD, DVD, and traditional television. Barreca is also spearheading WWE's effort to implement a new digital technique by which viewers can directly order pay-per-views by clicking on icons displayed during actual commercials.

Then there are WWE's outside ventures. WWE Films is already due to release its first movie, *See No Evil*, starring Kane as, you guessed it, a homicidal maniac. Additional movies featuring John Cena as a Marine and Steve Austin as a police officer are still in the works. In late-March, the WWE Music Group was officially launched, an enterprise that will make use of entrance themes, superstar recordings, and outside artists through various platforms, including film, television, radio, the Internet, ring tones, videogames, and emerging digital technologies.

And how does this affect WWE's bottom line? As of April 5, WWE stock had increased to \$17 per share, its highest level since 9/11. For WWE's third fiscal quarter, ending January 27, 2006, revenues totaled \$103-million, an amazing 67 percent from the \$82.7-mil-

lion generated during the same period in 2005. Net profit increased by 25 percent, from \$10.9-million to \$13.6-million. Pay-per-view buys and live-event attendance are up a bit, and the home video and merchandising sectors have improved even more.

Why the obsession with WWE? As Gorilla Monsoon bluntly put it, money is the driver in pro wrestling ... and WWE is the only company earning significant amounts of it. Many wrestlers are toiling in Ring of Honor, the independents, and, yes, TNA, in hopes of big paydays in WWE someday. As much as TNA diehards and ROH purists hate to admit it, all other promotions are simply derivatives of what WWE has been able to achieve. That doesn't mean WWE always presents the best product, or even has the best wrestlers, but it is the only wrestling company with a major reputation in the corporate world.

But that could change. Back on October 1, 2005, TNA's *Impact* premiered on Spike TV, marking the first time since *WCW Nitro*'s final program on March 26, 2001, that a promotion besides WWE had aired a show on national cable. During its time on Fox Sports Net, *Impact* was scheduled at various times depending on the region, and there was no guarantee

During the reign of "Stone Cold" Steve Austin in WWE, many small independent promotions were able to capitalize on the insurgent mutineer vs. despotic owner motif. Vince Austin (pictured), for example, was Canadian Extreme Wrestling's version of the WWE inspired, money-making theme.



that the show would air at all within a given week.

Spike TV's willingness to experiment with more wrestling programming after WWE's defection to the USA Network was a godsend for TNA. And, although the Jarretts and especially the Carters have poured millions into the fledgling company, Spike TV's parent company—Viacom—purchasing an ownership stake would instantly place TNA on par with WWE. Does any Viacom executive want to become a wrestling impresario like Ted Turner? Now is the perfect opportunity.

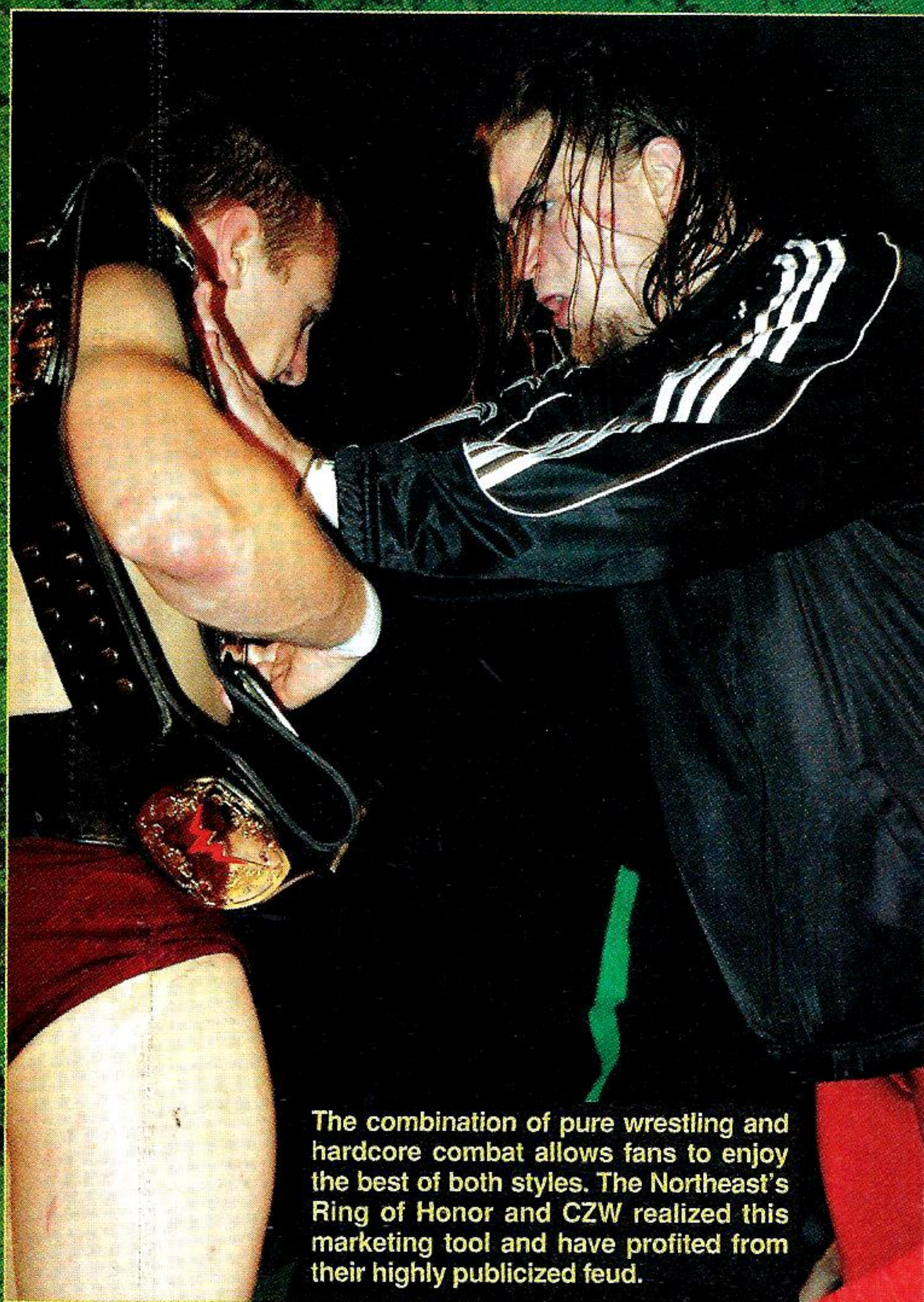
TNA's consolidation of its operations within Universal Studios in Orlando has helped ease its budget woes considerably. PPVs, however, remain TNA's primary revenue stream. Because TNA is such a young promotion, it's hard to compete with WWE, which is taking the same type of product and earning money from it through so many methods.

And what of the independent circuit? Smaller promotions tend to earn profits only when the major leagues are in a boom period. Between 1997 and 2000, nearly every indy had a "World Order" or a storyline involving a rebel badass and a tyrannical owner. But, whether they featured The Smooth World Order in Indiana, The Cue World Order in Virginia, "Cold-Heart" Keith Austin in North Carolina, or Vince Austin in Newfoundland, these little indies were generating plenty of beer-and-pizza money on the weekends. The merchandising revenue alone, whether from CWO T-shirts or bootleg copies of pay-per-views, helped indy promoters and wrestlers earn comfortable side incomes.

That isn't the case in 2006. Independent promotions are in a lose-lose situation. In desperation, they will experiment with new concepts and wrestling styles to draw an audience, some of which may be remembered as groundbreaking. Eventually, those ideas trickle up to the major leagues and then, in turn, wrestling catches fire on a national level and revenue trickles down to the indies again.

There are exceptions. Ring of Honor experimented with a pure wrestling style, inspired by Japan's *puroresu*, and attracted a cult following, first in the American Northeast and then around the world. Combat Zone Wrestling—located just a few miles south of ROH's Philadelphia home base—has gained a niche market with a hardcore style as well. In a rare example of business savvy on the indy circuit, ROH and CZW presented their differing wrestling philosophies at a March show in Philly's Viking Hall, drawing a crowd of 900 purist and hardcore fans. Neither ROH nor CZW is rolling in the dough right now, but their loyal audiences keep them in business through live attendance and DVD purchases.

So, how can the independent circuit become more profitable during lean times? As proven by the ROH-



The combination of pure wrestling and hardcore combat allows fans to enjoy the best of both styles. The Northeast's Ring of Honor and CZW realized this marketing tool and have profited from their highly publicized feud.

CZW example, cooperation is the key. TNA remains the flagship of its organization, yet the National Wrestling Alliance could do more to help profits among its territories, ranging from NWA Battlezone and NWA Blue Ridge to NWA Florida and NWA Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling. Likewise, the revived American Wrestling Association could create more synergy among affiliates such as AWA Apex, AWA Brew City Wrestling, and AWA Florida. Instead of just sharing common champions and swapping talent, NWA and AWA promotions should formulate marketing strategies, such as selling DVDs of other member franchises at live events and encouraging fans to follow their sister territories on the Internet. Unfortunately, the "merge-or-die" mentality has not made its way down to wrestling's independents.

The gloomy indy scene doesn't reflect interest in wrestling overall, however. Pro wrestling sank into a recession in 2001 and didn't begin to recover until 2004. Each year since, there has been a slight up-tick in WWE's revenue and TNA's chances of survival. Either WWE or TNA, or most likely a combination of both, will probably inspire another boom within a few years—and that will be good for all of wrestling. □

STATE OF THE FUTURE

How hard is it to predict the future of wrestling? Consider this: Half the time, the promoters and creative teams don't even know what's going to happen next. But unpredictability is part of wrestling's appeal. While nothing is certain, based on current trends, professional wrestling's future appears quite good

IT HAS BEEN said that pro wrestling's appeal cannot die. If it could, it would have died out a long time ago, buried under lousy wrestlers, intelligence-insulting storylines, and shady promoters.

That may be something of a jaded perspective, but it's something wrestlers and wrestling fans can take a measure of optimism in. Despite all of the criticisms of the wrestling industry today, there's something comforting in knowing that the sport has survived worse travails than it currently faces.

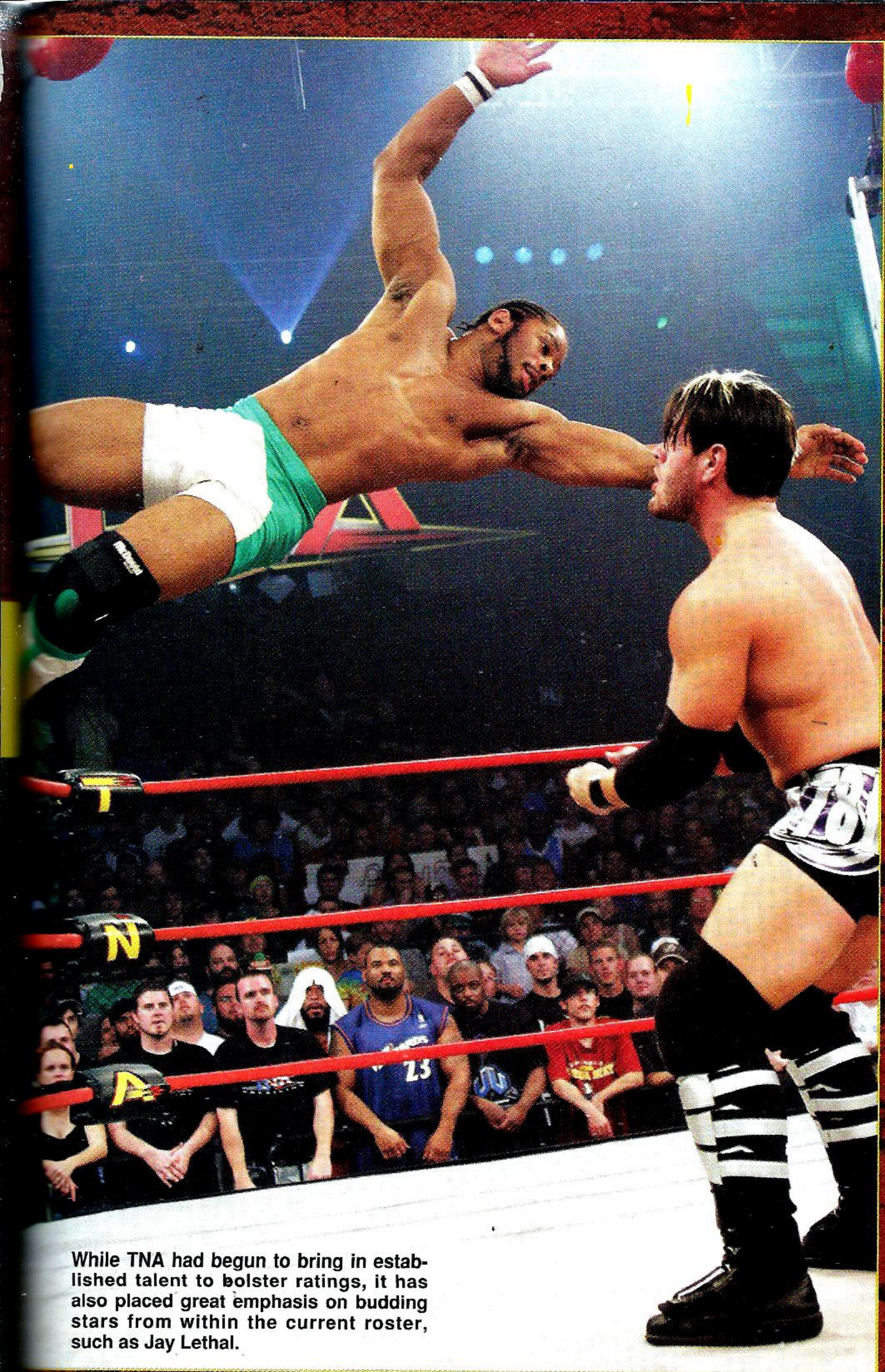
WWE is experiencing a weird paradox: Its arena attendance, TV ratings, and pay-per-view buys are up, but the company has been unable to create one new megastar to fill the void left by Steve Austin and The Rock.

The key to WWE's recent success has been increasing its business overseas with successful tours, increased pay-per-view availability, and a huge merchandise boom. Wrestling has proved to be wildly popular in Italy, the United Kingdom, and the Philippines. A new generation of fans is embracing the sport internationally, and that creates unlimited potential—not only for WWE and perhaps TNA, but for any enterprising independent promoters willing to risk the expense of running overseas before an eager fan base.

With all that money to be made overseas, it's a no-brainer that WWE will increase its number of foreign tours. The company might even consider holding a PPV event in Europe, as it did with SummerSlam 1992 in London, England.



The fan reaction to John Cena has been mixed, much to the dismay of WWE Creative. Love him or hate him, the success of Cena may determine which direction WWE heads in the future.



While TNA had begun to bring in established talent to bolster ratings, it has also placed great emphasis on budding stars from within the current roster, such as Jay Lethal.

But even with success overseas, WWE is still going to have to establish a strong new superstar with mainstream appeal. Randy Orton came up short; the backlash against John Cena is growing; and Batista has been too injury prone to establish himself as a viable, long-term solution. Most concerning, however, is that there aren't any potential superstars waiting in the wings either. Even with a world title shot in the "bank," Rob Van Dam's time seems to have passed, Shelton Benjamin lacks charisma, and

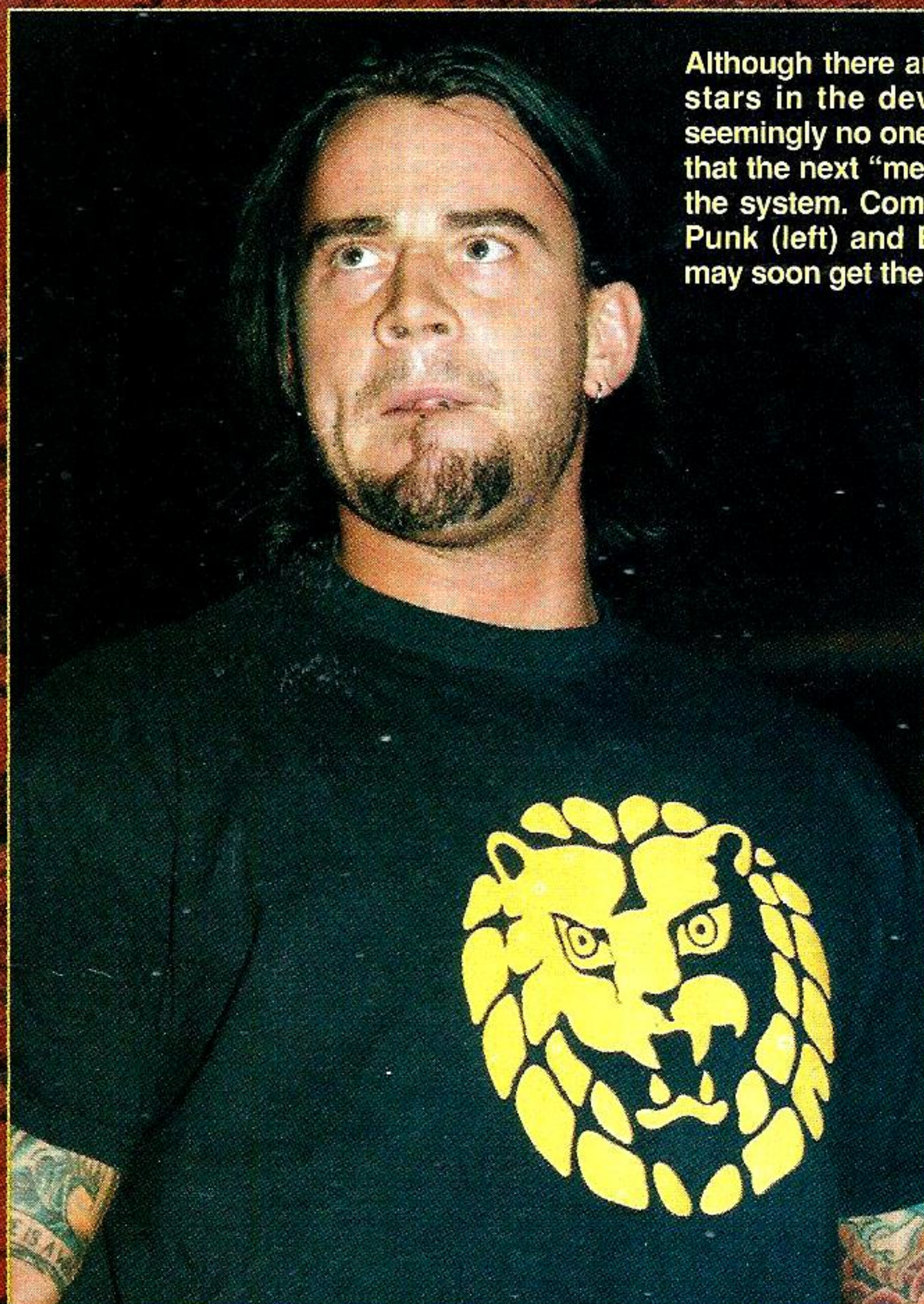
and everyone is working that much harder to elevate their games.

The WWE front office learned an important lesson with the sub-par ratings for the prime-time *Saturday Night's Main Event* special on NBC in March. That show marked WWE's return to network television after a 16-year absence. However, unlike the glory days of *SNME*, when Hogan, Randy Savage, and Roddy Piper won over mainstream audiences, non-wrestling fans didn't tune in to the

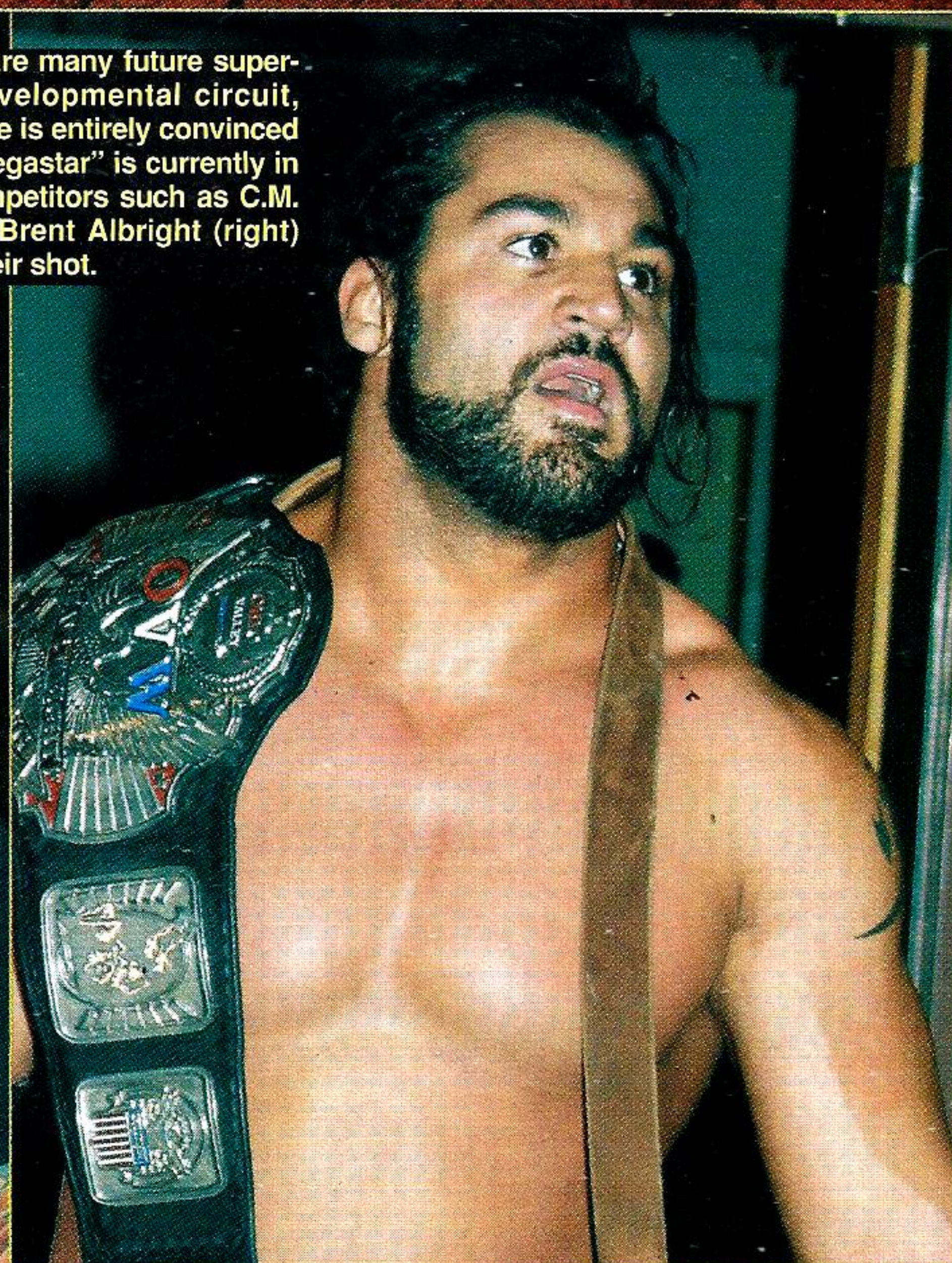
Bobby Lashley is still too raw for a main-event push. Carlito Caribbean Cool seems to be a legitimate future superstar, but he may be too small to make it to the top level.

That means WWE is forced to again rely on veterans like Steve Austin, Mick Foley, Hulk Hogan, and Ric Flair. Unfortunately, none of these men are the monster draws they have been in the past. A return by The Rock *might* be a huge draw, but the rest of the "old-timers" have lost most of their drawing power because of their increasingly frequent appearances. As for The Undertaker, Kurt Angle, and Triple-H, they each have battled serious injuries and, more importantly, are in desperate need of interesting, main-event level challengers.

As 2006 goes on, Cena may prove to be the company's greatest hope. While recent fan reactions have been mixed at best, Cena still remains extremely popular with women and younger fans. If he can continue to draw those demographics and slowly win over the adult males who have been lustily booing him of late, he could establish himself as WWE's top moneymaker and help improve business in North America. That puts an awful lot of weight on his shoulders. It also puts pressure on the developmental roster. Everyone in OVW and Deep South sees that the stage is set for new stars in WWE,



Although there are many future superstars in the developmental circuit, seemingly no one is entirely convinced that the next "megastar" is currently in the system. Competitors such as C.M. Punk (left) and Brent Albright (right) may soon get their shot.



2006 event, and NBC finished behind CBS, ABC, and Fox in the ratings. The message seems to be clear: If mainstream audiences aren't showing interest, the company has no choice but to work harder to appease its core customers. That means we can expect to see more emphasis placed on match work rate, storylines with longer builds, and more "traditional" angles, mixed with some of the unpredictability of the "Attitude" era.

Down in Orlando, TNA started 2006 on a high note with *Impact* getting off to a great start on Spike TV. In fact, Spike was poised to move TNA's flagship program into its primetime Thursday night lineup. However, the network has opted to keep *Impact* in a late-night time slot albeit on Thursdays, which some might say is a step backward. The fact of the matter is that it lessens the pressure that the company is under to produce close to a 1.0 rating each week, which may not be a realistic goal at this point.

TNA again finds itself at a familiar crossroads. Which should it push harder: the X division, or Monday Night War era "name" competitors? TNA will have to pay close attention to rating patterns now that Scott Steiner and Sting are joining Jeff Jarrett in one of the company's top storylines. If TNA can connect with those old WCW viewers who simply stopped watching wrestling when Vince McMahon bought WCW, their future looks great.

But part of *Impact*'s success on Spike has apparently been because it follows UFC programming and has been able to retain a portion of that viewership. These are viewers who appreciate athleticism and realism and seem to prefer stiff, X division bouts with wrestlers like Samoa Joe and Christopher Daniels to storyline-driven angles.

The company also wisely decided to move away from Jarrett as the face of the promotion. With Christian Cage as NWA heavyweight champion, TNA is open to a variety of fresh, intriguing, and potentially very profitable matches on the top of the card. The big question for TNA is whether the front office will panic if Cage doesn't immediately draw the fans and PPV buys the company hopes to achieve. It would be all-too-easy for the company to switch the belt back to Jarrett, and, at this point, *that* would be the real step backward.

TNA has also been looking into bringing in more veteran faces, including Bill Goldberg. In fact, a Goldberg-Samoa Joe series has already been widely discussed, and, with the right build-up and execution, it could be the most profitable series of matches in TNA history. However, if TNA spends too much on these veteran competitors, they run the risk of mortgaging the company on talents that may not necessarily be the drawing cards TNA management thinks they are. Remember, Sting, Jarrett,

While WWE has become more and more storyline oriented and TNA hasn't made a commitment to arena shows, fans can still look to the independent promotions, such as Combat Zone Wrestling, to offer an alternative. Here, former champion Super Dragon lands on Sabian as Chris Hero and Claudio Castagnoli hold him in place.



Steiner, and Goldberg were all in WCW at the end, and WCW's arena attendance and TV ratings were in the toilet.

As for the independent scene, many territories have folded over the past two years, while others

CHIKARA. There is a thriving and disparate troop of indy promotions out there today. None of them are in a position to challenge WWE or TNA for national attention, but each offers an alternative product, and that can only be healthy to wrestling as a whole. □

have combined with neighboring companies. The vast majority of independent promotions will always live hand-to-mouth. Really, the key to success is a combination of smart advertising and promotion, savvy match-making, and intelligent use of outside wrestlers. Based in part on the popularity of Ring of Honor and similar promotions, more and more fans have gotten involved in tape-trading and online communities. A wrestler can earn widespread exposure simply by appealing to a plugged-in, network wrestling community. Perhaps more than ever before, it is now easier for a skilled, hardworking indy wrestler to build up his name and find work throughout the country. And as long as talented indy workers can find consistent work and not grow frustrated, it bodes well for the future of the independent wrestling scene.

What fans might find lacking in WWE or TNA, they can usually find in one indy or another. Fans of the technical game can turn to ROH. Fans who miss ECW can turn to IWA Mid-South or Combat Zone Wrestling. Fans who miss old-fashioned shtick can get turned on to

WRESTLEMANIA

Photos by George Napolitano

22

- ➔ Misterio Comes Up Big ...
- ➔ Cena Comes Of Age ...
- ➔ McMahon Gets Comeuppance!

By Frank Ingiosi

THERE IS NO event in the professional wrestling world that is more anticipated and revered than *WrestleMania*. It is, without question, the biggest pay-per-view event of the year, and often times lives up to its promise of creating legends.

However, this year, the promotion surrounding *WrestleMania 22* outshined the lackluster product that aired on April 2. The show failed to create a truly memorable, and company-defining moment. Rey Misterio Jr.'s unlikely capturing of the World title did not have the feel of 'Mania's memorable

moments of the past.

Rather, the evening consisted of matches that either prolonged existing feuds, or were booked solely for the event itself. Many of the contests seemed to have little to no major impact on the WWE landscape. In that respect, *WrestleMania 22* felt more like a monthly pay-per-view and less like the biggest event of the year.

As is our own annual tradition, *PWI* looks at every match of this year's event, how the match came about, what transpired during the match, and what the result means for WWE.

KANE & THE BIG SHOW



CARLITO CARIBBEAN COOL & CHRIS MASTERS

➔ **HOW WE GOT HERE:** Facing no viable competition for the World tag team championship, the volatile duo of Carlito Caribbean Cool and Chris Masters were paired together to challenge the champions at 'Mania. Each challenger had been engaged in a brief feud with one of the champions prior to *WrestleMania*.

➔ **WHAT WENT DOWN:** The challengers moved noticeably quicker than the champs. At one point, Carlito and Masters dispatched Show and focused their combined efforts on Kane. When the duo worked as a team, they looked very solid. What appeared to be a competitive bout came to a surprisingly quick finish, when Masters, attempting a double axe-handle from the top rope, leveled partner Carlito, who was firmly in Kane's grasp. The "Big Red Machine" quickly capitalized, finishing off Carlito with the choke-slam and cover for the win.

➔ **WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE:** WWE was in a win-win situation with Carlito and Masters being paired together.

Had they won the straps, it would have immediately sparked a renewed interest in the stagnant tag team division, and maybe led to some great matches down the road with up-and-coming talent. However, with Masters and Carlito losing, WWE was in the position of having two wrestlers, who are each tremendously marketable on their own, blaming each other for the loss. This inevitably led to Carlito turning against Masters, and an entertaining feud between two of WWE's rising superstars was born.

For Kane and The Big Show, the victory would be their last together as champions. The following night on *Raw*, the colossal duo's six-month reign came to an end with a shocking loss to Mikey and Kenny of The Spirit Squad. With the tag division being what it is, the former champs will likely go their separate ways, with Kane re-entering the WWE championship hunt and Show acting as *Raw*'s resident enforcer.



UP FOR THE CHOKESLAM!

Kane & The Big Show vs. Carlito
Caribbean Cool & Chris Masters

Chris Masters was only a factor in the World tag team title match when he "accidentally" nailed his teammate Carlito with a double axe-handle to the head. Kane and The Big Show had little trouble dispatching the two and retaining the championship.



SIX-WAY "MONEY-IN-THE-BANK" LADDER MATCH

➔ **HOW WE GOT HERE:** Unlike last year's version, both Raw and Smackdown competitors were eligible for this match, with each brand entering three men. A series of qualifying matches was held on each program to determine each brand's entrants.

➔ **WHAT WENT DOWN:** A match containing this many competitors, not to mention a stipulation that involved climbing 15 feet to grab a dangling briefcase, could generally go one of two ways: It could either be a parade of botched spots and sloppy wrestling, or it could be a tremendously entertaining contest with all competitors expanding on their individual repertoires as they push for victory. Fortunately, in this case, the fans were treated to the latter.

The high spots were amazing and plentiful, with each man sacrificing his body in an effort to secure

the victory and a guaranteed world title shot sometime during the next 365 days. Stunning sequences of events led to the finish of the match. Raw's Rob Van Dam scaled the ladder uncontested, seemingly poised to grab the briefcase. As if from nowhere, Shelton Benjamin, also of Raw, leapt onto the opposite side of the ladder, and the two begin to spar. On a second ladder, set up next to the two battling combatants, Smackdown's Matt Hardy attempted to swing the briefcase over to his side and steal the victory. Turning his attention to the opportunistic Hardy, Benjamin switched ladders and began pummeling Hardy. RVD, seeing both opponents preoccupied on the second ladder, cleverly tipped them over, spilling his main competition over the top rope and down to the floor below. Alone with nothing but

the briefcase above him, RVD reached up and pulled down the prize.

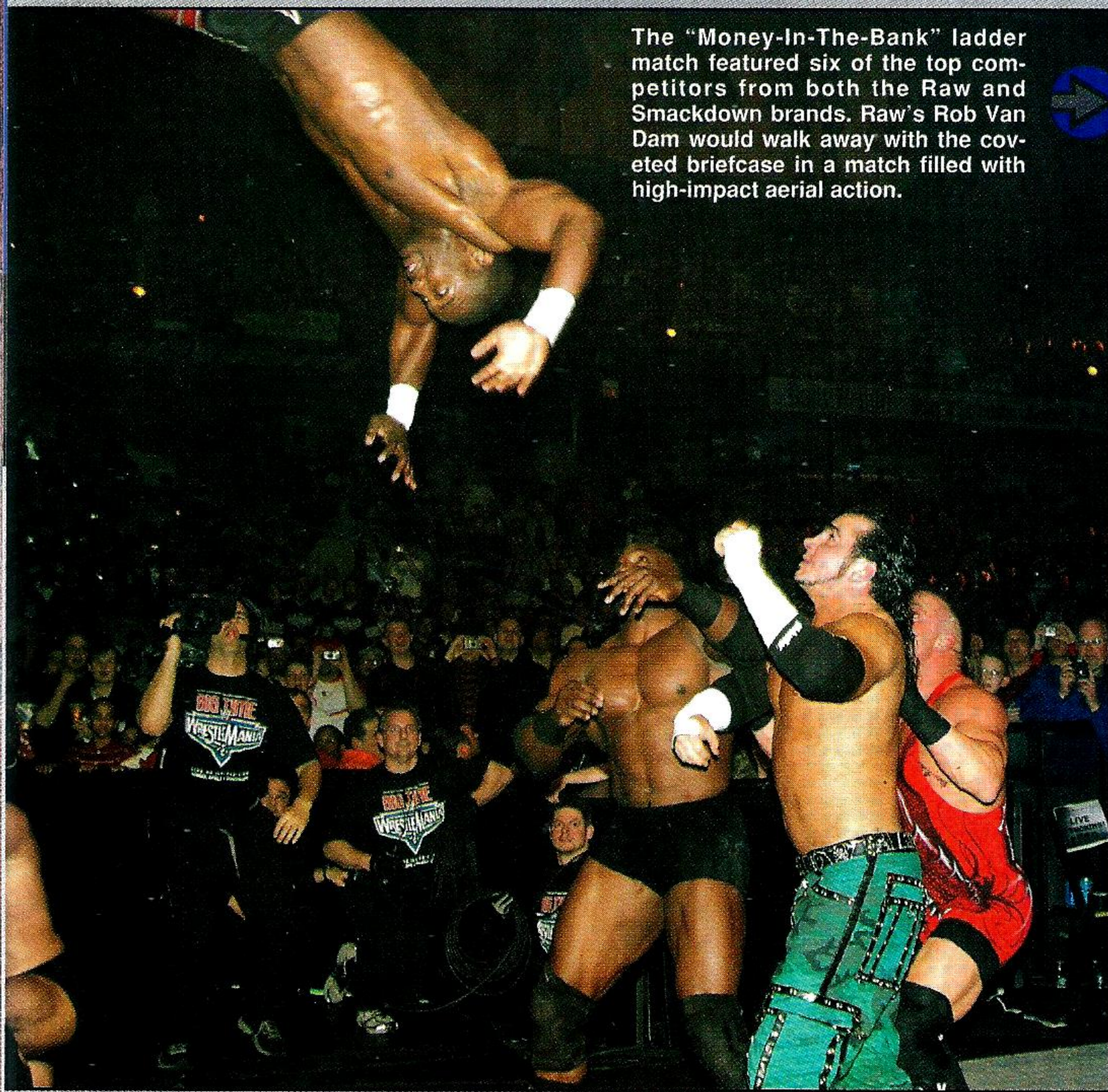
➔ **WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE:**

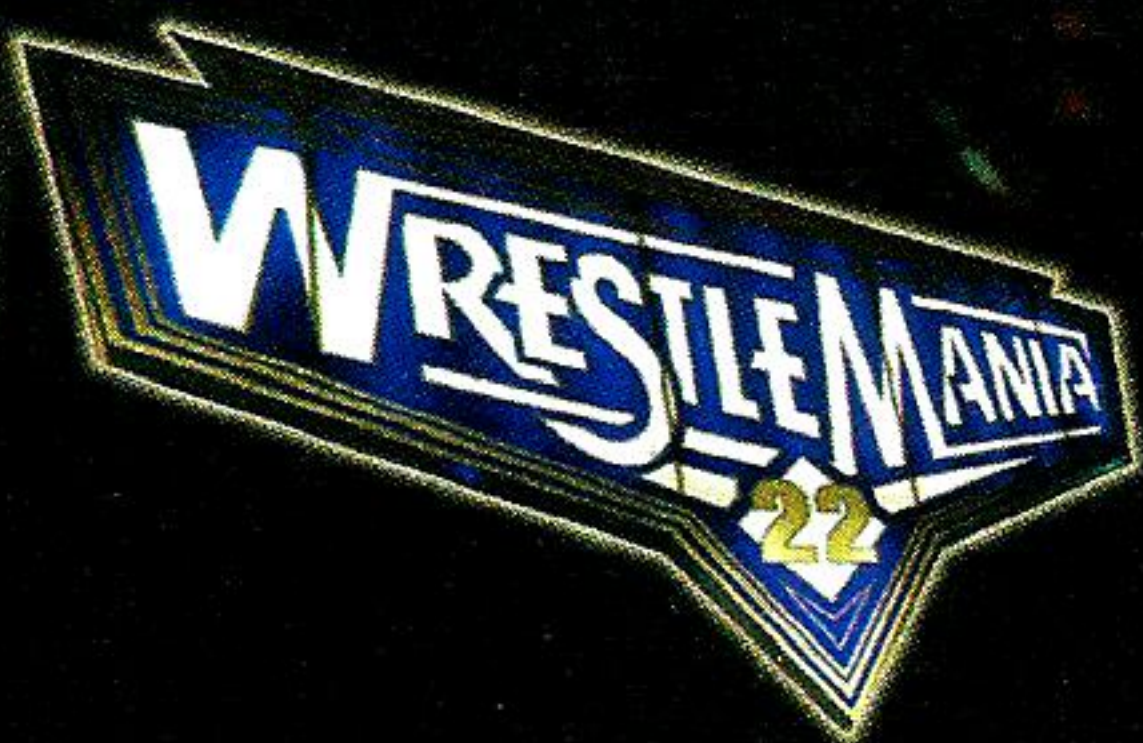
WWE has found a bona fide tradition that should be a part of future WrestleManias for many years to come.

With a talent roster so large and varied that it actually requires two brands, WWE needs a match such as this to showcase some of its superstars who may not be integral parts of major storylines, yet are talented enough to be seen in the biggest pay-per-view of the year.

Individually, the man that benefits the most from this match also happens to be the winner—Rob Van Dam. Following an extended recovery period after knee surgery, Van Dam was poised to make an immediate impact on the Raw brand and possibly make a run at legitimate main-event status. With the victory and guaranteed title shot, he appears well on his way to making that prospect a reality.

The "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder match featured six of the top competitors from both the Raw and Smackdown brands. Raw's Rob Van Dam would walk away with the coveted briefcase in a match filled with high-impact aerial action.





BATTLE AT THE TOP

Six-way "Money-In-The-Bank"
ladder match



CHRIS BENOIT **VS** JOHN BRADSHAW LAYFIELD

➔ **HOW WE GOT HERE:** During the February 24th edition of *Smackdown*, Benoit broke JBL's hand when he slammed it between the ring steps and post. During his recovery, JBL made it his mission to separate the "Rabid Wolverine" from the U.S. championship.

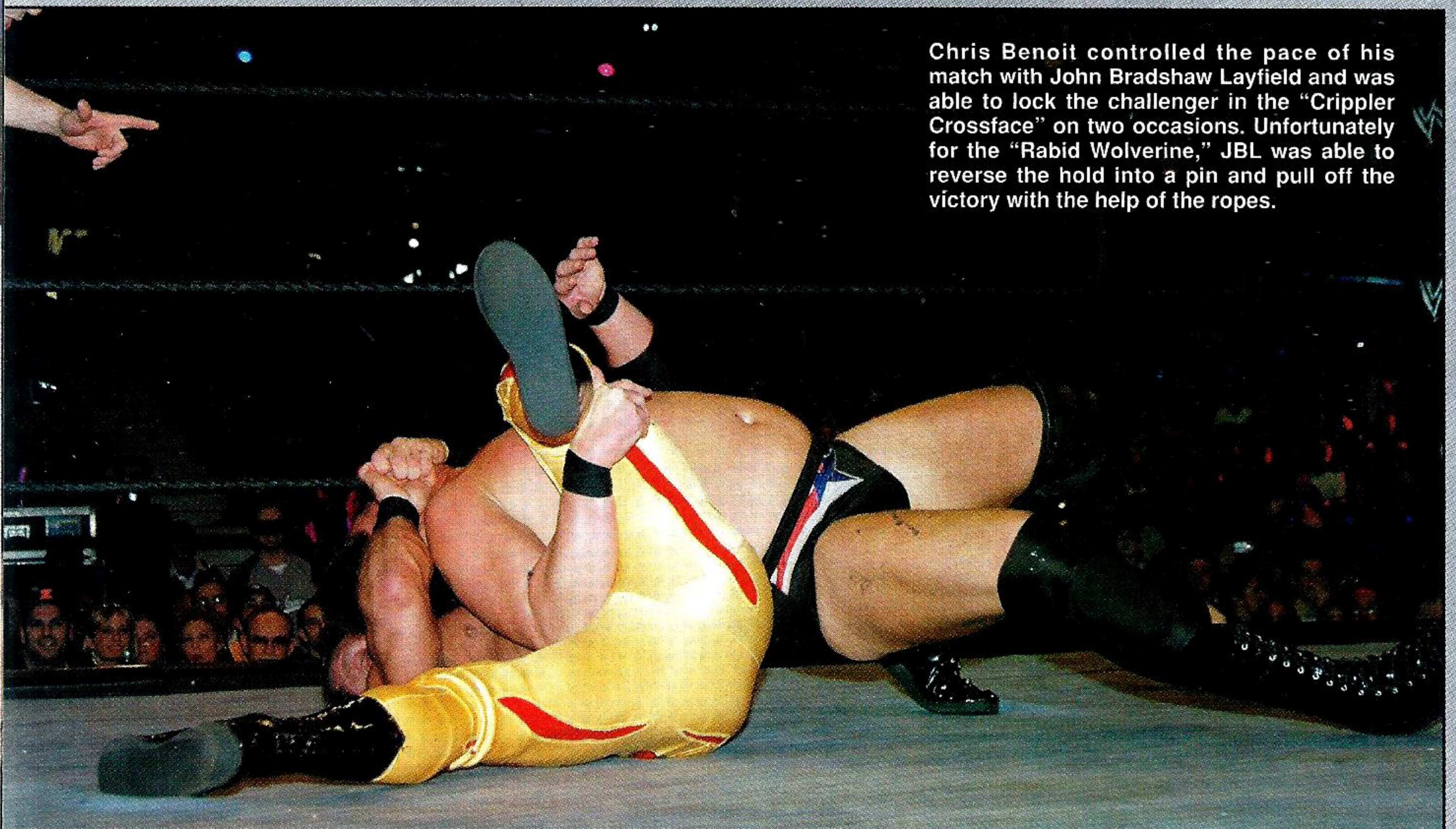
➔ **WHAT WENT DOWN:** While Benoit could not match JBL in the strength department, the "Wrestling God" was no match for Benoit's legendary repertoire of pure grappling maneuvers. Unfortunately, the champion may have tried a little too hard to clamp on his "Crippler Crossface" and secure a quick victory. Benoit, usually very effective in springing his submission finisher on an unsuspecting opponent, telegraphed the move twice, with the second time proving to be more costly than he could have imagined.

After successfully nailing JBL with the flying headbutt, Benoit attempted a cover, but the challenger kicked out at two. Following a brief exchange, JBL lined up the champion for the clothesline from hell. Benoit was able to sidestep

it and pull JBL into the "Crippler Crossface" but was unable to cinch the hold. JBL rolled Benoit over and got the three-count, holding on to the middle rope for leverage.

➔ **WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE:** The match showcased two former world champions vying for Smackdown's equivalent of the Intercontinental championship. What does this mean for WWE in the long run? Likely, very little; however this may be an effort to increase the prestige associated with the title. If that's the case, it was a very smart move by WWE to utilize two former main-eventers while at the same time elevating the U.S. title to a place it has not been since its WCW days.

Individually, this match showed exactly where Benoit fits into the future of Smackdown, as well as how far JBL has fallen since his unlikely run as WWE champion. Benoit will likely be looked upon to anchor the mid-card of Smackdown and be a top contender for the U.S. title. Conversely, JBL looked as if he was back in Acolyte-shape, and his wrestling matched.



Chris Benoit controlled the pace of his match with John Bradshaw Layfield and was able to lock the challenger in the "Crippler Crossface" on two occasions. Unfortunately for the "Rabid Wolverine," JBL was able to reverse the hold into a pin and pull off the victory with the help of the ropes.



PAIN IN THE NECK

Chris Benoit vs. John Bradshaw Layfield



EDGE MICK FOLEY



HOW WE GOT HERE: After John Cena won a match against Edge that allowed the winner to choose the special guest referee for the follow-up contest, Cena chose Mick Foley. When Cena again defeated Edge, this time with Foley as the referee, the "Rated R Superstar" blamed the "Hardcore Legend" for his loss. Edge challenged Foley to a match at WrestleMania 22, and Foley accepted, stipulating that it would have to be a hardcore match.



WHAT WENT DOWN: The match featured all of those things that make a hardcore contest so enjoyable: thumbtacks, barbed wire, fire, and a various

assortment of street signs and baking sheets. Both men took turns torturing the other.

The contest came to an explosive conclusion. With Edge down, Foley took the opportunity to douse a table that was set up on the arena floor with lighter fluid. As he did, Lita drilled him in the knee with a baseball bat and proceeded to pour more fluid on the table and set it ablaze. Stunned, Foley turned back to the ring as Edge barreled him through the ropes with a spear. Both men were badly hurt, but Edge regained his composure long enough to roll on top of Foley and score the win.

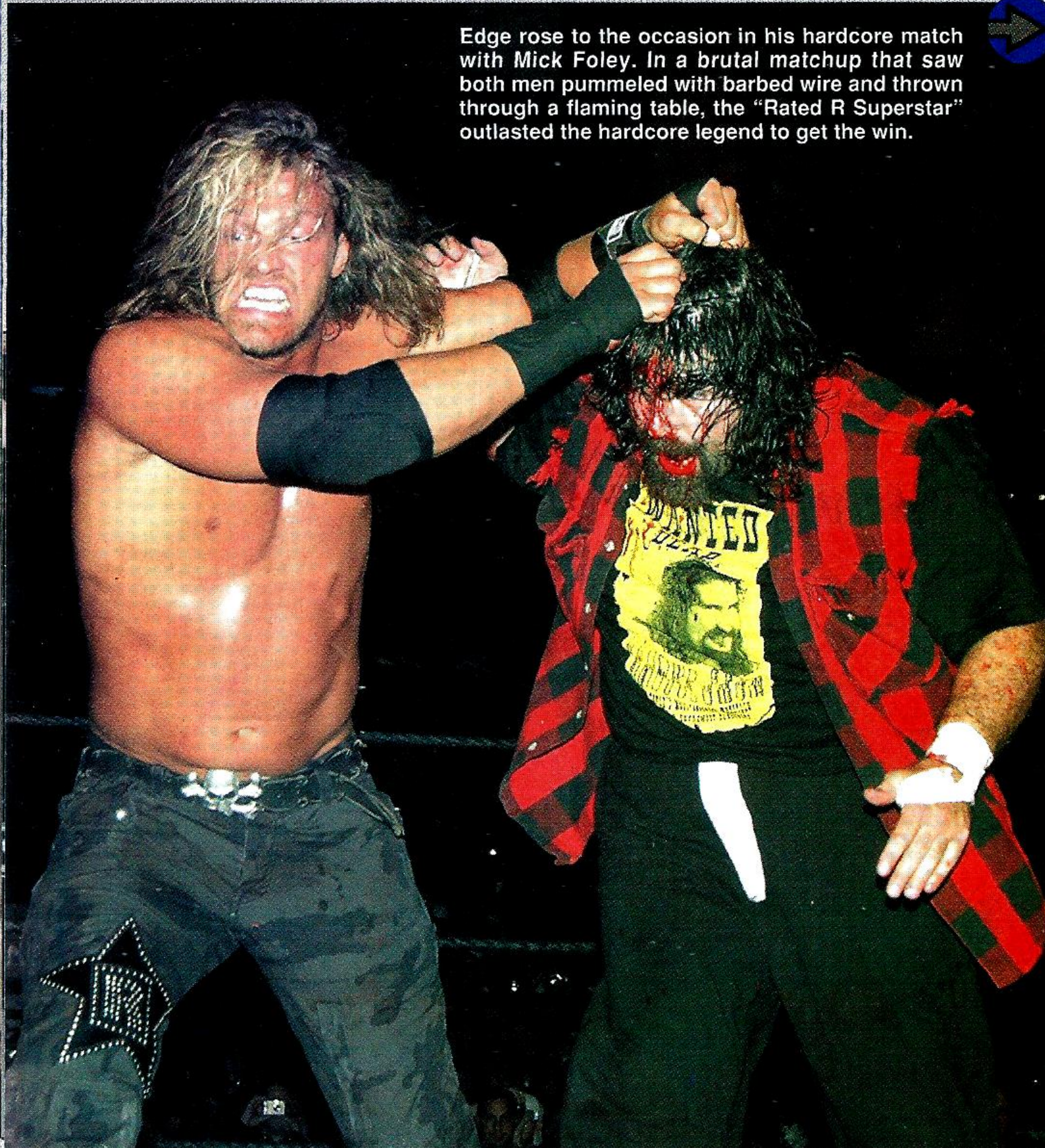


WHAT IT MEANS FOR

WWE: The fan reaction to this match means that WWE should expect an increased buyrate for its ECW pay-per-view in June. Despite a seemingly endless flow of people who say otherwise, hardcore wrestling is a huge draw, and this match proved it. Foley was at the top of his psychotic game, and Edge met him every step of the way. The wrestling purists probably should learn to accept the fact that hardcore matches, while rare, will continue to be a part of WWE programming until they fail to generate revenue.

Edge, one of the Raw brand's thoroughbreds, had to win the contest or else face further criticism and fall even deeper out of the WWE championship picture. Despite participating in a gimmick match that did little to further his career, Edge was immediately thrust back into the WWE championship mix when he and Triple-H squared off against John Cena the following night on *Raw*.

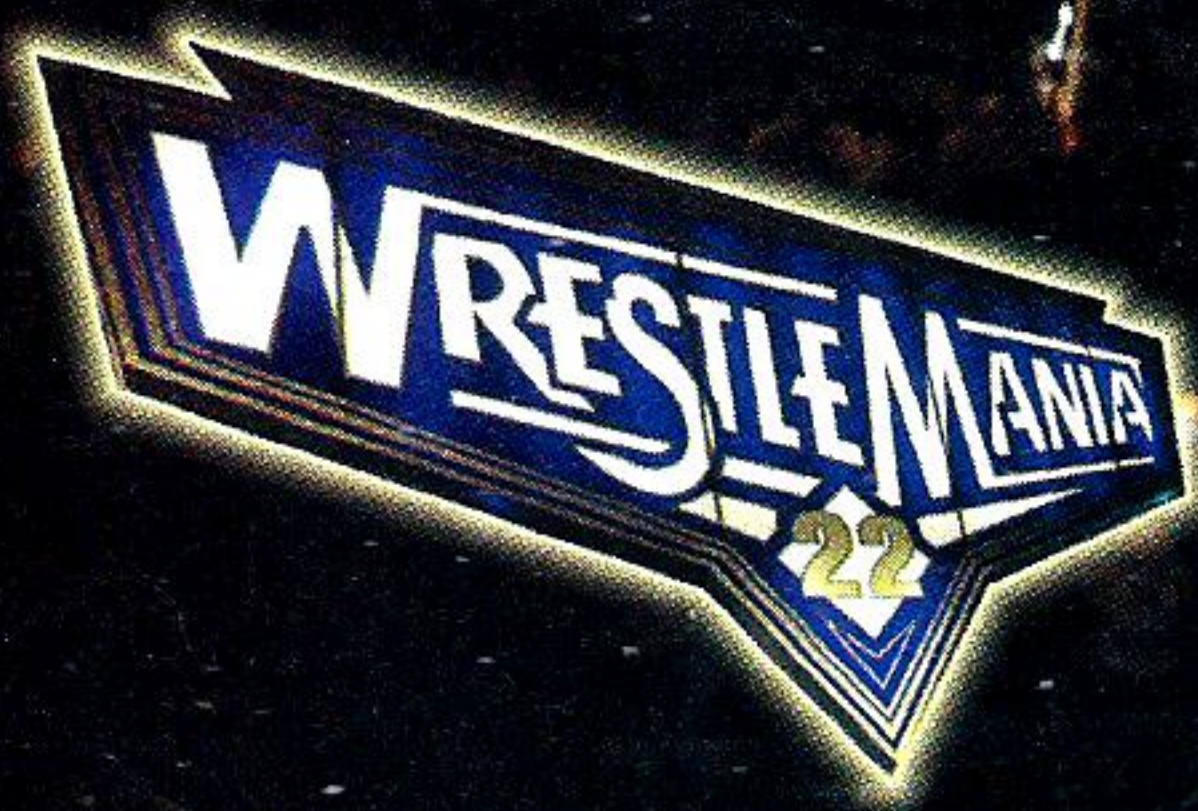
Edge rose to the occasion in his hardcore match with Mick Foley. In a brutal matchup that saw both men pummeled with barbed wire and thrown through a flaming table, the "Rated R Superstar" outlasted the hardcore legend to get the win.





CASCADING THUMBTACKS

Edge vs. Mick Foley



THE BOOGEYMAN **VS** BOOKER T AND SHARMELL

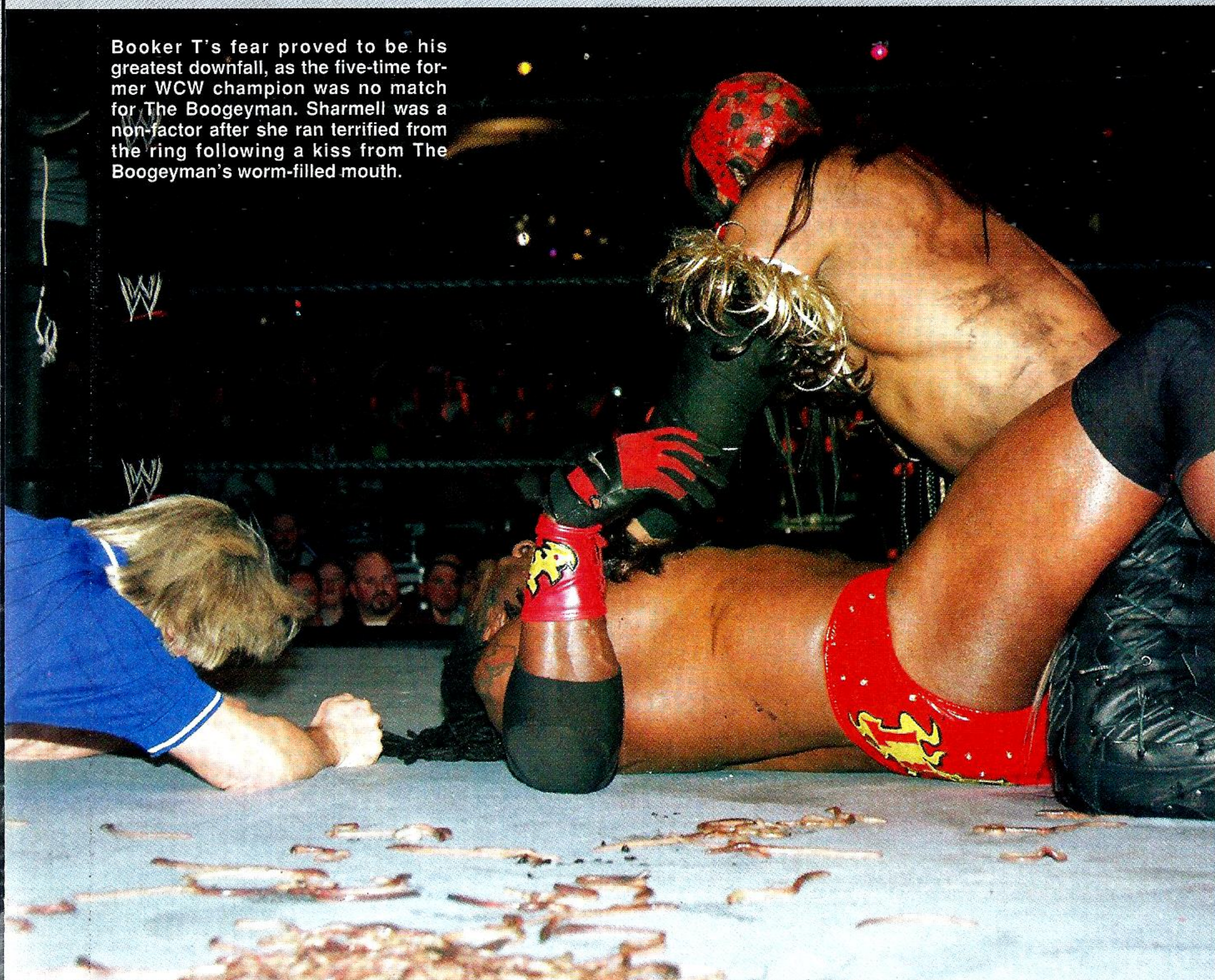
➔ **HOW WE GOT HERE:** The five-time former WCW champion Booker T and wife Sharmell were terrified by The Boogeyman—and his worms—as the obscure wrestler stalked the couple on *Smackdown*.

➔ **WHAT WENT DOWN:** Following a particularly odd sequence that left Booker hung up in the corner with his face toward the ringpost, Boogey revealed a handful of worms and stuffed them in his mouth. This momentary halt in the action allowed Sharmell to creep up behind her opponent with Boogey's staff in tow, prepared to clock the eerie one from behind. At the last second, Boogey turned, faced Sharmell,

and planted a worm-drenched kiss on her lips. Terrified, Sharmell ran from the ring as Boogey dropped Booker with a modified falling power bomb for the win.

➔ **WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE:** This match will likely have no great effect on WWE outside of throwing People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals even further into a tizzy. Unfortunately, this probably did more to hurt Booker's position on the Smackdown roster than it did to elevate The Boogeyman. Booker continues to fall further down the heavyweight ranks, while The Boogeyman will likely continue to confuse and disgust the fans.

Booker T's fear proved to be his greatest downfall, as the five-time former WCW champion was no match for The Boogeyman. Sharmell was a non-factor after she ran terrified from the ring following a kiss from The Boogeyman's worm-filled mouth.



WRESTLEMANIA 22



IN THE GRIP OF TERROR!

The Boogeyman vs. Booker T & Sharmell

TRISH STRATUS **VS** MICKIE JAMES

➔ **HOW WE GOT HERE:** James' sick obsession with Trish began with her first appearance as an overzealous fan on *Raw* in 2005. From there, James' devotion to her idol took many strange turns, often-times with the challenger becoming overtly amorous toward Trish. The champion reached her limit with James on *Saturday Night's Main Event*, leading to a showdown for the women's championship at WrestleMania 22.

➔ **WHAT WENT DOWN:** From the start of the match, it was evident that James was not only in the champ's head, but also that her years of idolatry would give her a distinct advantage. Stratus' initial intensity was impressive as she managed to disrupt James' comfort zone and send the challenger reeling to the outside. James was able to recover, and she proceeded to isolate Stratus' knee, which would prove to be the champ's eventual undoing. James hit one high intensity move after another, with Stratus' injured knee often the focus. Whenever the champion attempted

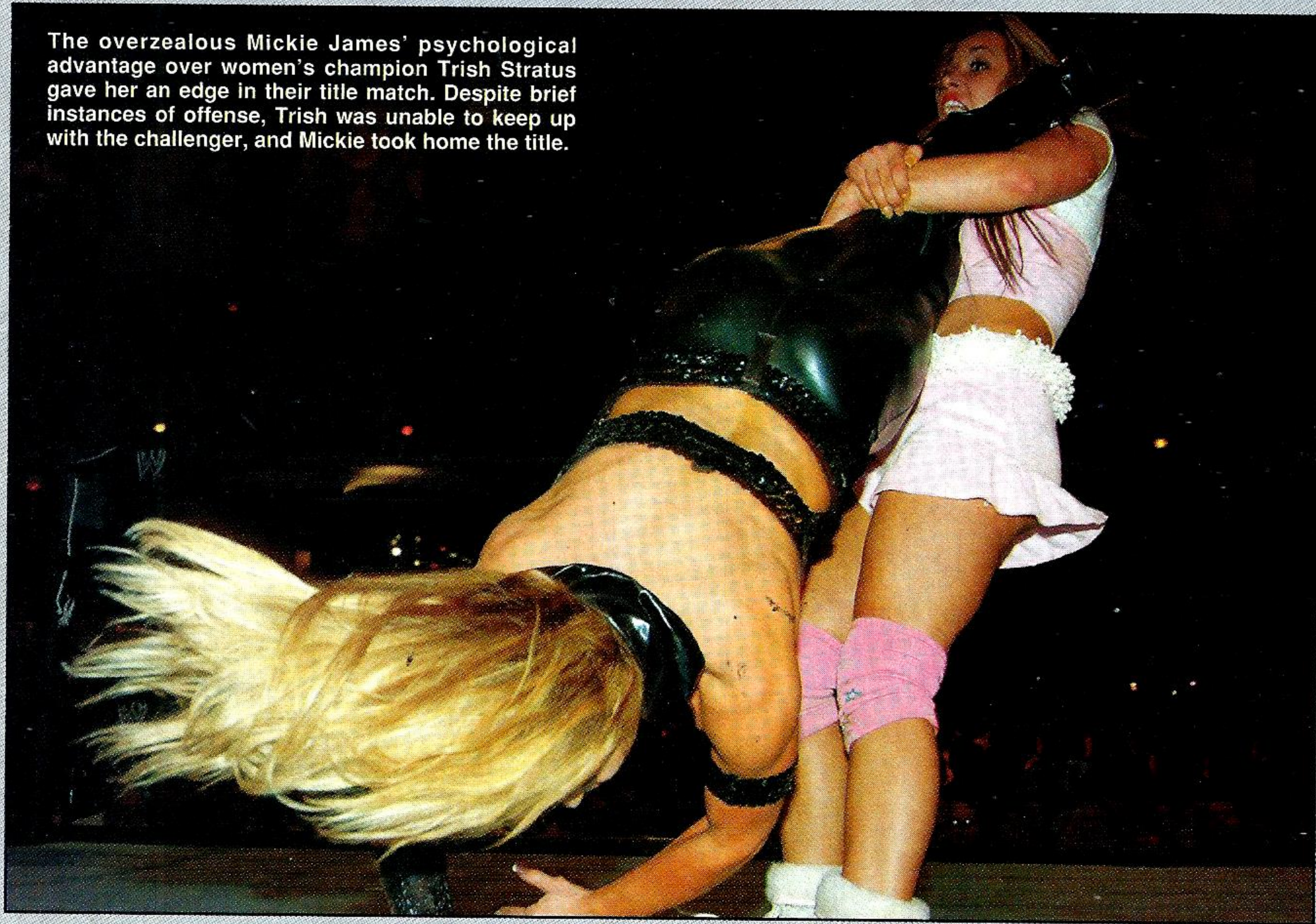
to mount a comeback, the challenger would counter impressively.

The finish came after a failed attempt by James to level Stratus with the champion's trademark "Stratusfaction" bulldog. James recovered and leveled Stratus with a chick kick and covered her for the pin.

➔ **WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE:** WWE now has two bona fide stars in its women's division, both of whom are extremely capable of carrying matches. The company could proceed with a James-Stratus feud, however the women's division would be better served by having both of its top competitors start programs with other wrestlers.

James looked like the seasoned veteran in the match. She conducted herself with all the poise of a deranged sociopath who just happens to have an amazing array of wrestling talent. Stratus never seemed to find her stride, and her nearly 16-month championship run came to an abrupt end.

The overzealous Mickie James' psychological advantage over women's champion Trish Stratus gave her an edge in their title match. Despite brief instances of offense, Trish was unable to keep up with the challenger, and Mickie took home the title.





THE HOME STRETCH!

Trish Stratus vs. Mickie James



SHAWN MICHAELS **VS** VINCE McMAHON

➔ **HOW WE GOT HERE:** Coinciding with the release of the DVD profiling the career of Bret Hart, Mr. McMahon touted the infamous "Montreal Screwjob" incident of 1997. Urging the chairman to "let it go," Michaels incurred the wrath of his boss, and the destruction of the "Heartbreak Kid" quickly became McMahon's sole purpose in life.

➔ **WHAT WENT DOWN:** From the moment the bell rang, it was apparent that HBK was more intent on hurting McMahon than merely taking the victory. This battle would be personal, as Michaels' very public battles with substance abuse had become fodder for the chairman's verbal assaults.

The match saw Michaels survive outside interference from The Spirit Squad (who were quickly dis-

patched) as well as Shane McMahon, whom HBK handcuffed to the bottom rope. All the interference merely delayed the inevitable, as Michaels took out months of frustration on McMahon, leaving him a bloody mess.

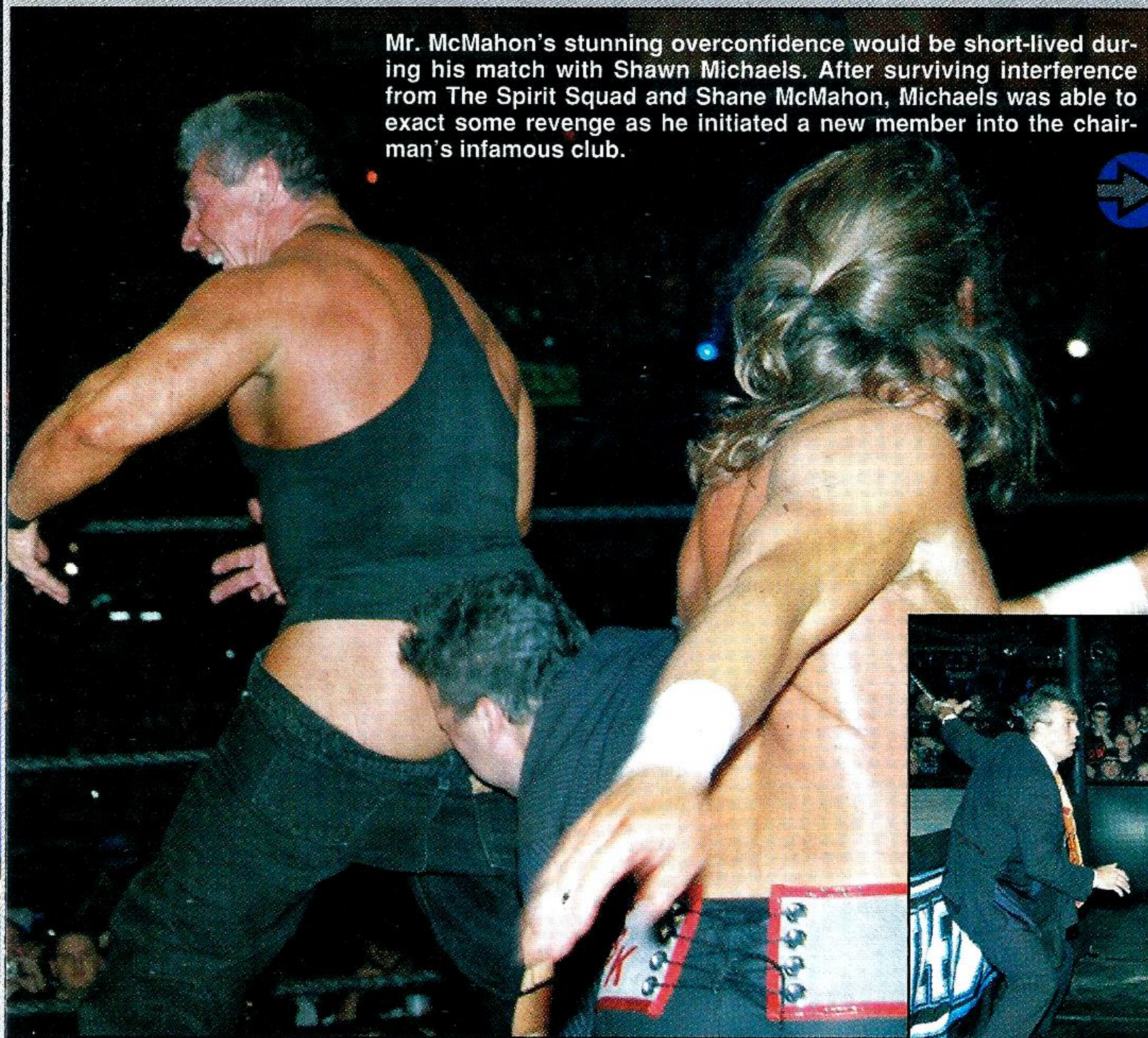
Michaels placed a garbage can over McMahon's head and laid him down face up on a table. He then climbed a tall ladder, dusted off his old DX crotch chop, sprung from the ladder, and rattled McMahon's brains with an elbow to the garbage can.

As WWE officials and medics attempted to extract McMahon from the ring, HBK stopped them. Lifting the bloodied chairman to his feet, Michaels pulled McMahon close and told him that he was going to "kick his teeth down his throat." Backing up four steps,

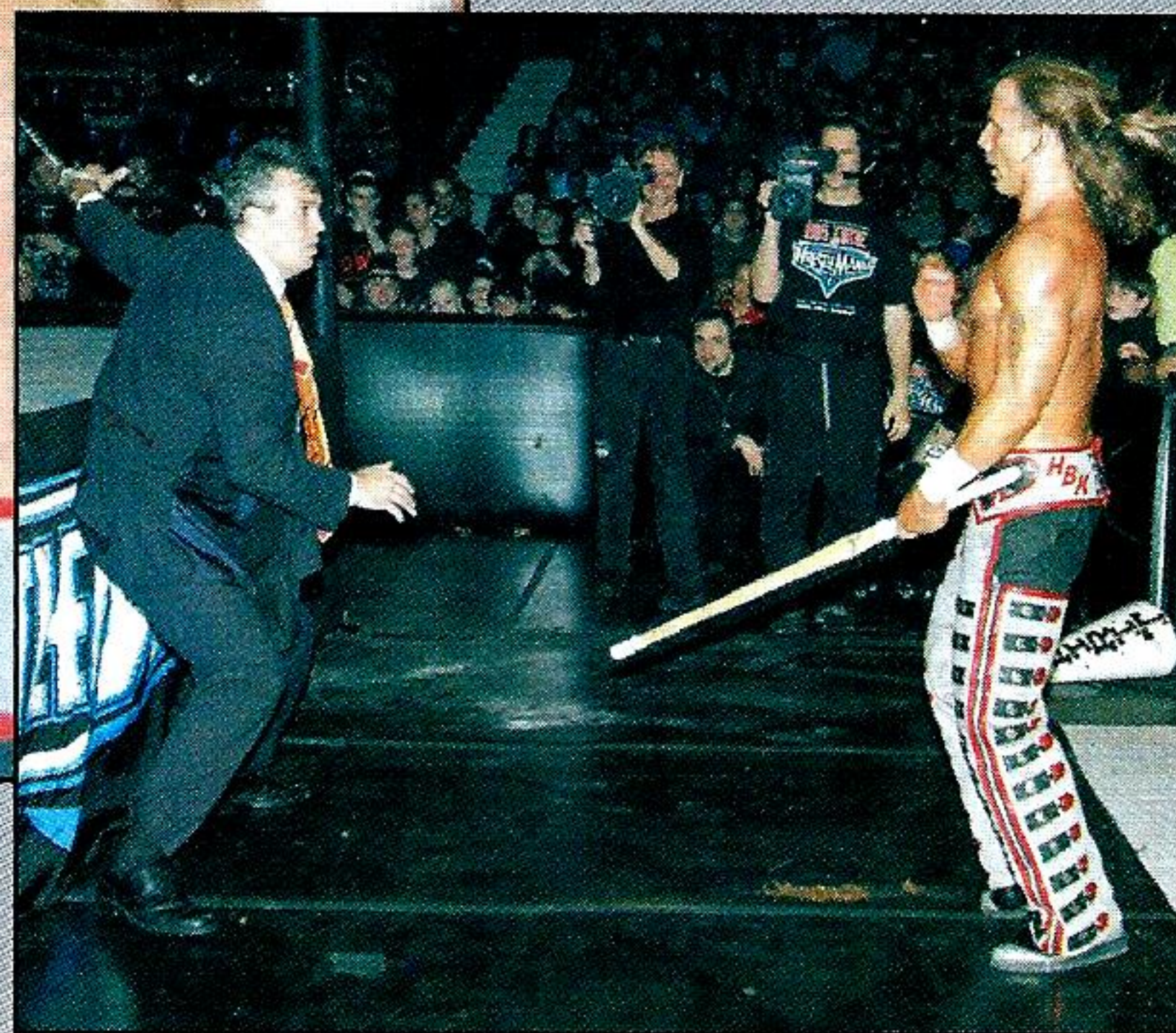
Michaels launched himself boot-first into McMahon's skull. HBK then fell on top of McMahon, getting the victory via pinfall.

➔ **WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE:** Basically, Vince McMahon needs to stop calling out his top superstars and challenging them to matches. Michaels joins a growing list of main-eventers, including Hulk Hogan, Steve Austin, and Triple-H, that have all pummeled their boss as part of a pay-per-view. As with most of the matches on the

Mr. McMahon's stunning overconfidence would be short-lived during his match with Shawn Michaels. After surviving interference from The Spirit Squad and Shane McMahon, Michaels was able to exact some revenge as he initiated a new member into the chairman's infamous club.



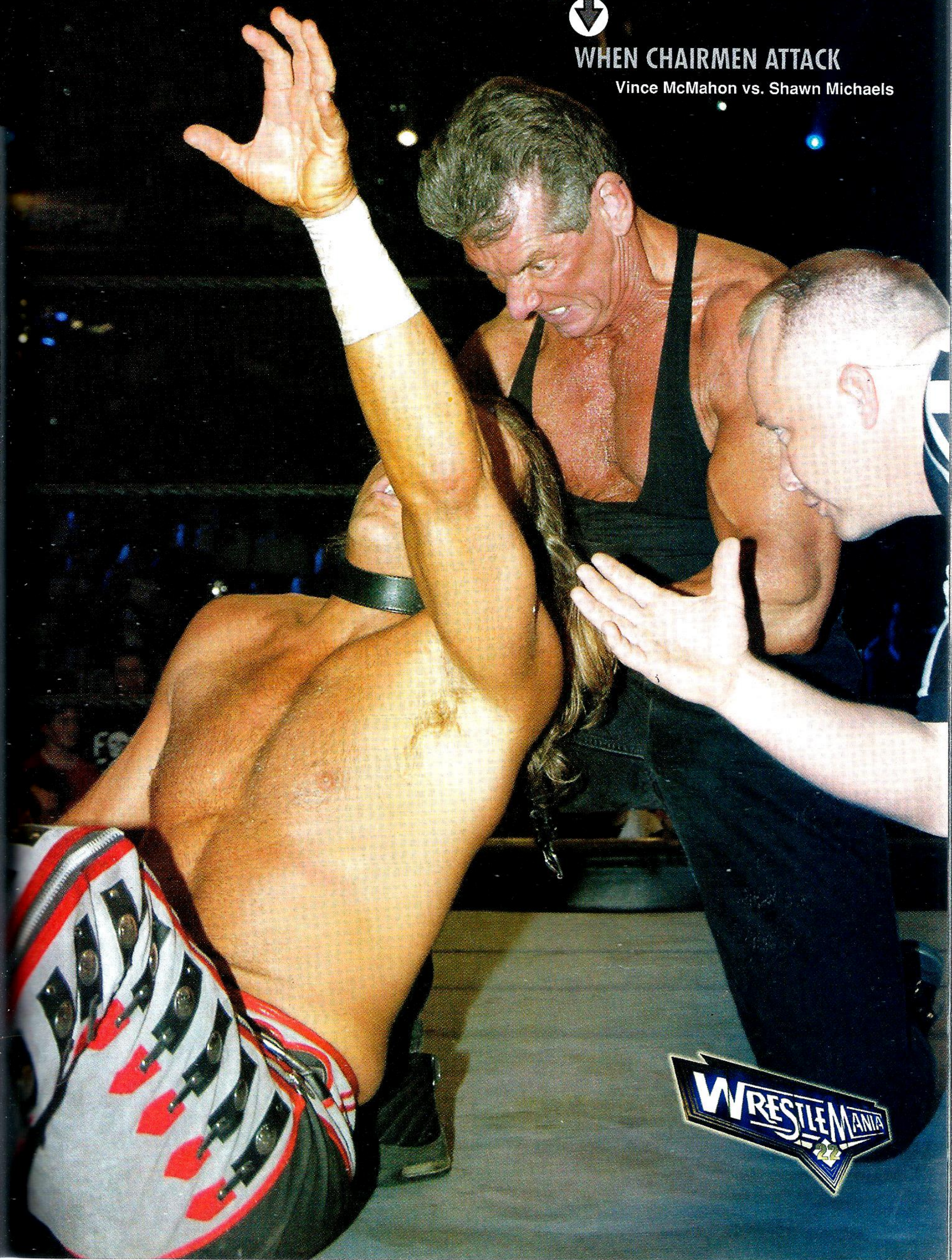
Weeks of frustration and torment ended as Michaels punished both Vince and Shane. HBK went as far as to imitate Shane's trademark dance ... before pummeling him with a kendo stick (right).





WHEN CHAIRMEN ATTACK

Vince McMahon vs. Shawn Michaels

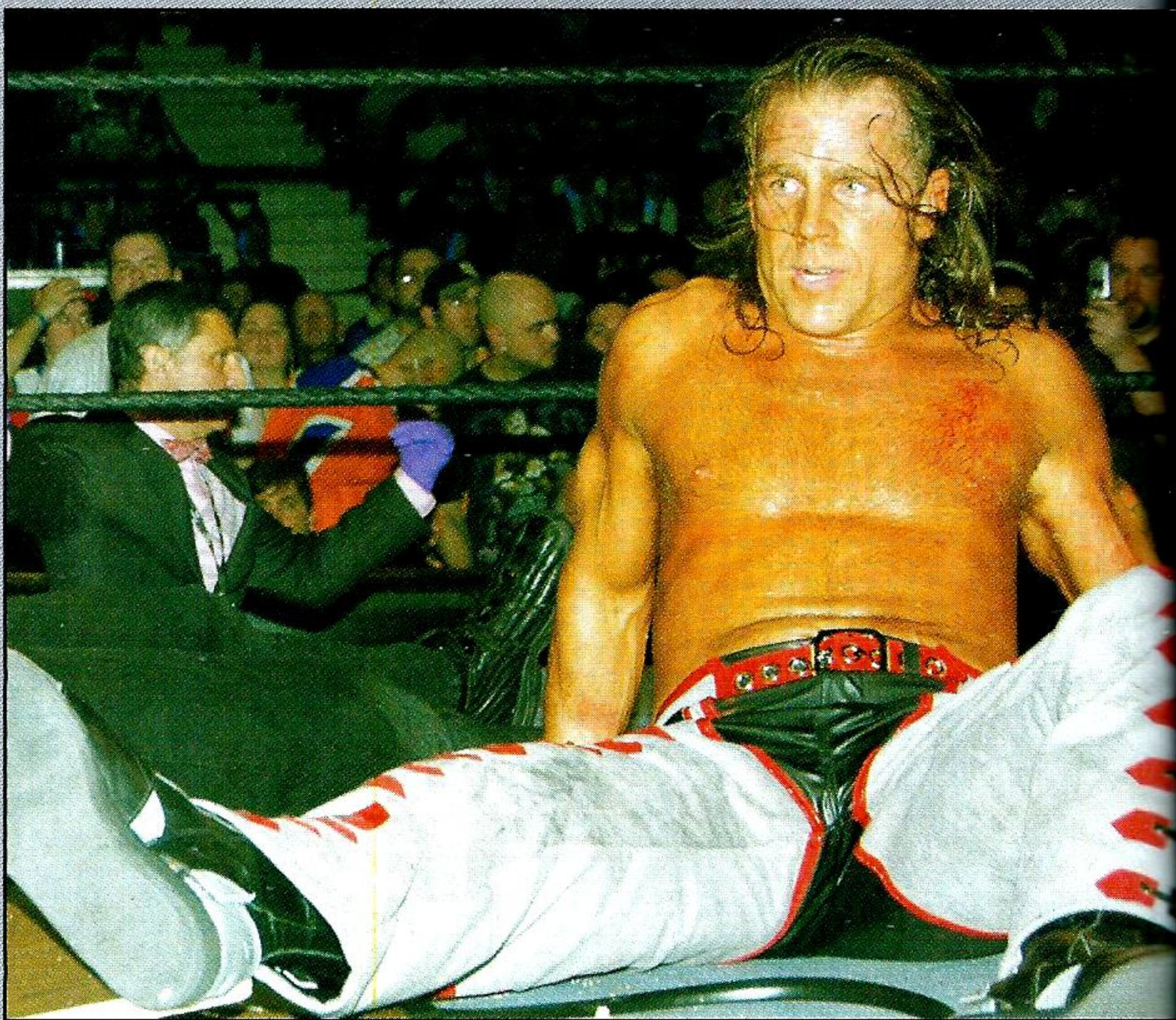


WrestleMania 22 card, this contest will have few long-term ramifications for the company, good or bad. However, the feud between the two wrestling icons should have ended with the match, and that was not the case.

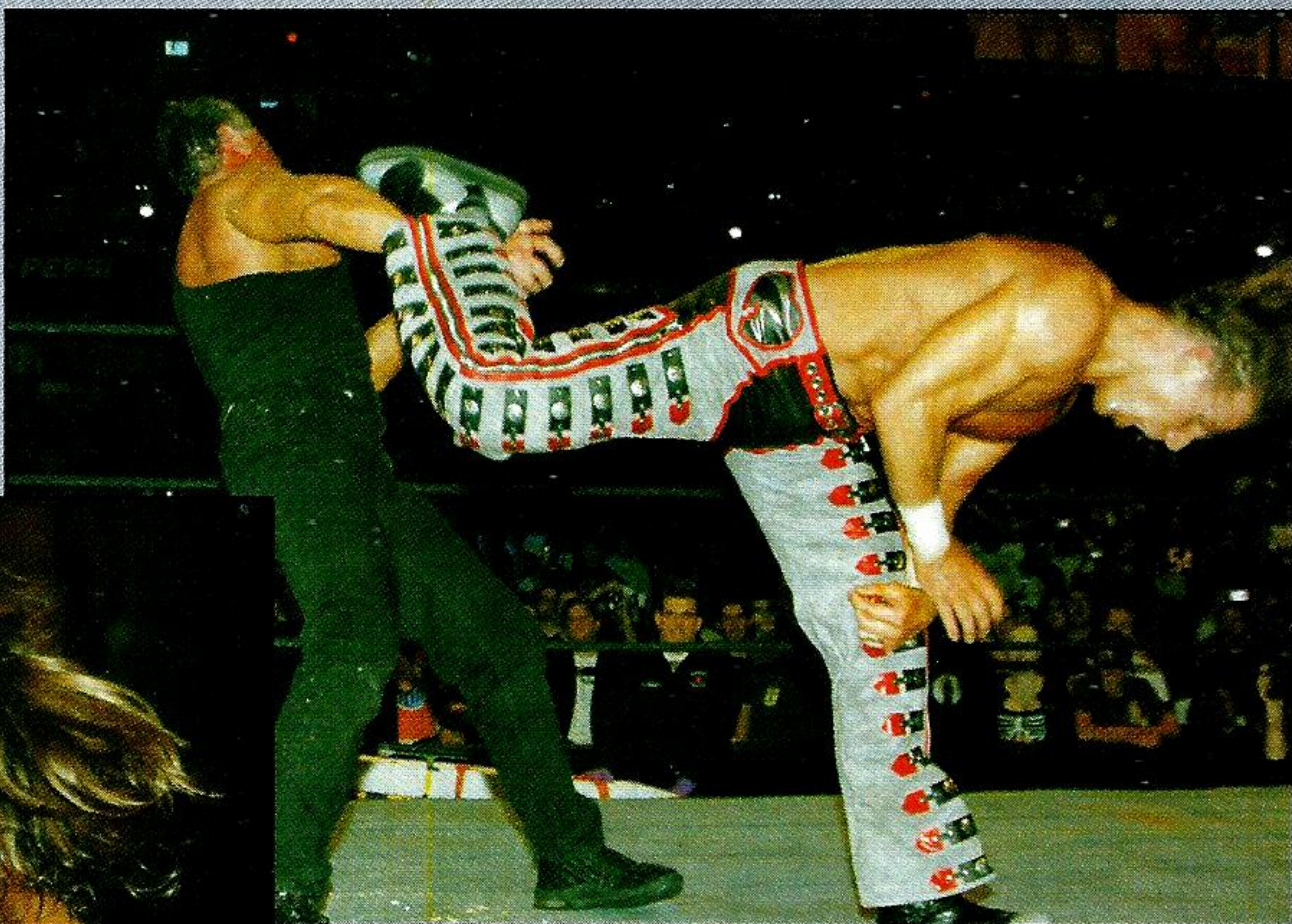
The following night on *Raw*, McMahon prolonged the battle by calling out Michaels, and his tag team partner ... God. Unfortunately the only impact this feud appears to have is giving Mr. McMahon, who is seemingly slipping into the throws of dementia, more face-time.

What else can be said about Michaels? Any man who can make both the immobile Hulk Hogan and egomaniacal Vince McMahon look good in high-profile matches in a span of eight months must be one of the all-time greats. However, this match does little to increase the legacy of Michaels in the long run. This wasn't a great match, but rather an entertaining world-class beat-down that everyone could enjoy.

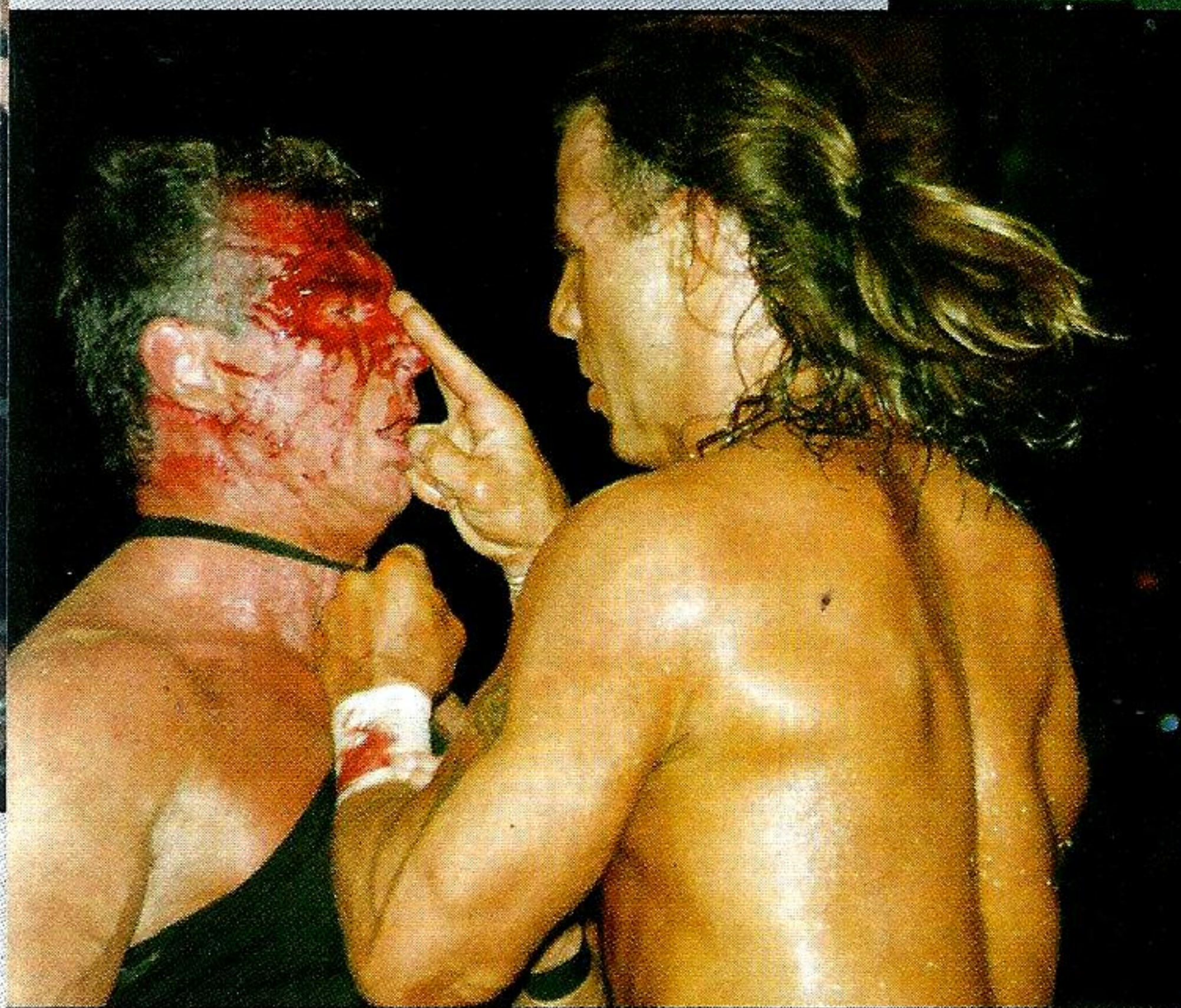
Unfortunately, this match could also mean that Michaels, despite his ring acumen, has no real role with the company outside of elevating younger talent or participating in gimmicky matches that are 10 years too late. Michaels has, quite literally, achieved all he can in WWE at this



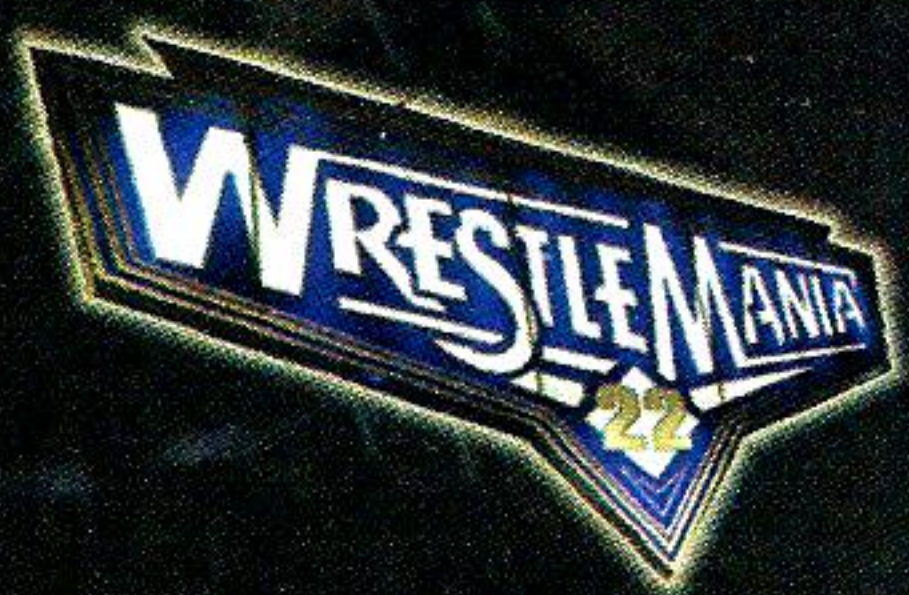
Michaels exhibited a side that fans had not seen from the superstar since his carefree days as a member of Degeneration X. The icon appeared to have it wrapped up after he dropped an elbow from the top of a 12-foot ladder onto a trashcan-entombed McMahon.



Before finishing off McMahon and possibly putting an end to his torment, Michaels had some words for his boss (left), followed by a little "Sweet Chin Music" for good measure (above).

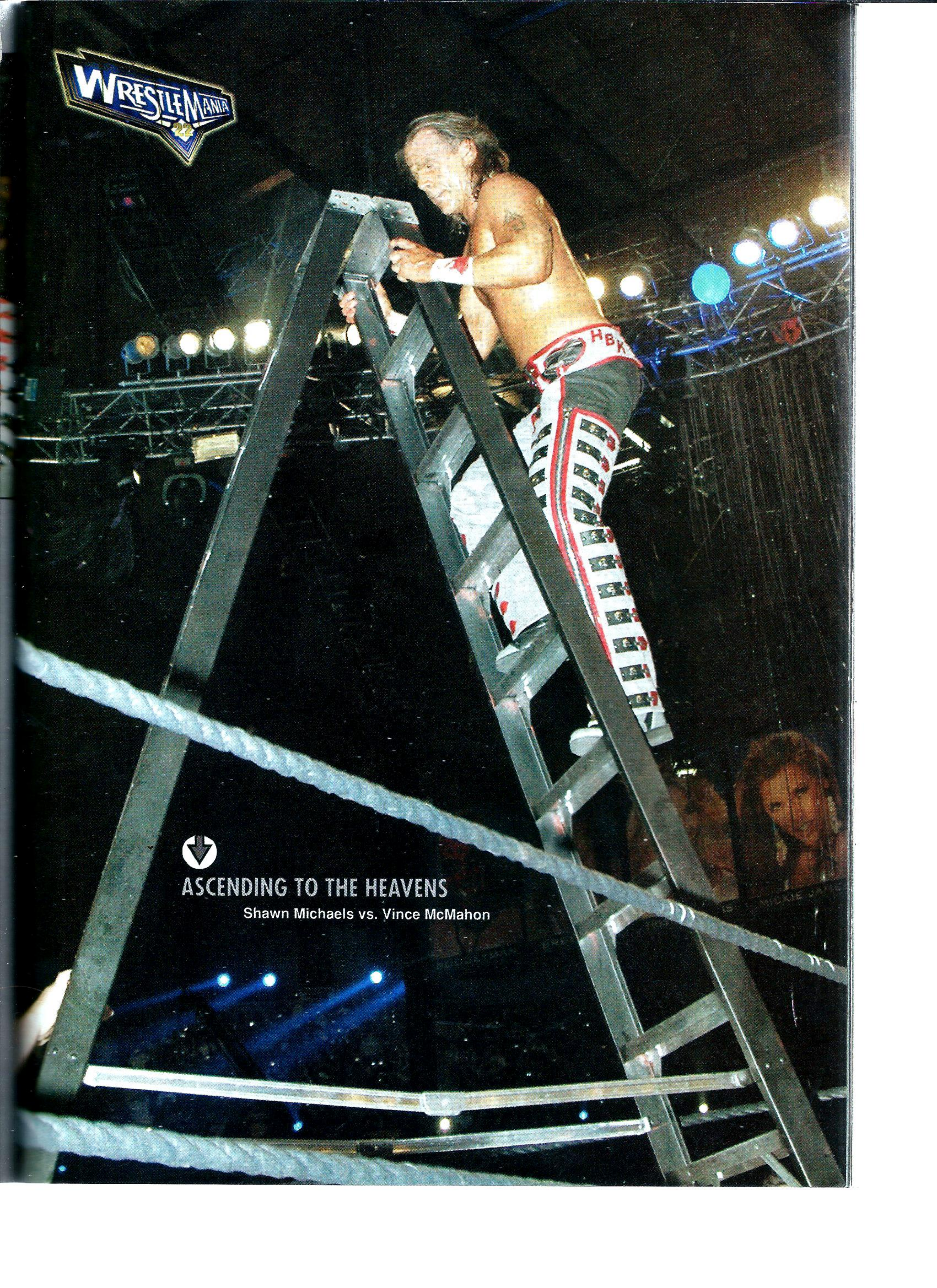


point in his career. Settling the score with McMahon was possibly the final demon—short of goading Bret Hart out of retirement—Michaels will likely have to slay in his career. This match, while not having tremendous implications from a storyline perspective for WWE, may signal the beginning of the end of the storied in-ring career of HBK.



ASCENDING TO THE HEAVENS

Shawn Michaels vs. Vince McMahon



REY MISTERIO JR.

VS

RANDY ORTON

VS

KURT ANGLE



HOW WE GOT HERE: Three of the most shocking events in recent WWE history led to the creation of this match. When World champion Batista was forced to forfeit the strap due to injury, Angle made the surprising leap from the Raw brand to Smackdown in an effort to capture the vacant championship. The former Olympic champion would do just that, winning a 20-man battle royal to claim the title.

Less than three weeks later, the diminutive Rey Misterio Jr., the second overall entrant in the event, won the Royal Rumble, thus securing himself a world title shot at WrestleMania. Misterio opted to challenge Angle. However, the last man Misterio eliminated in winning the Rumble, Randy Orton, began a series of tasteless, verbal assaults on the late Eddie Guerrero in an effort to goad Misterio into a match for his World title shot.

At No Way Out, Orton defeated Misterio via pinfall, using the middle rope to gain leverage. Seemingly out of the title picture, Misterio was later added to Smackdown's main event at WrestleMania by General Manager Theodore Long, making the contest a three-way battle for the World title.



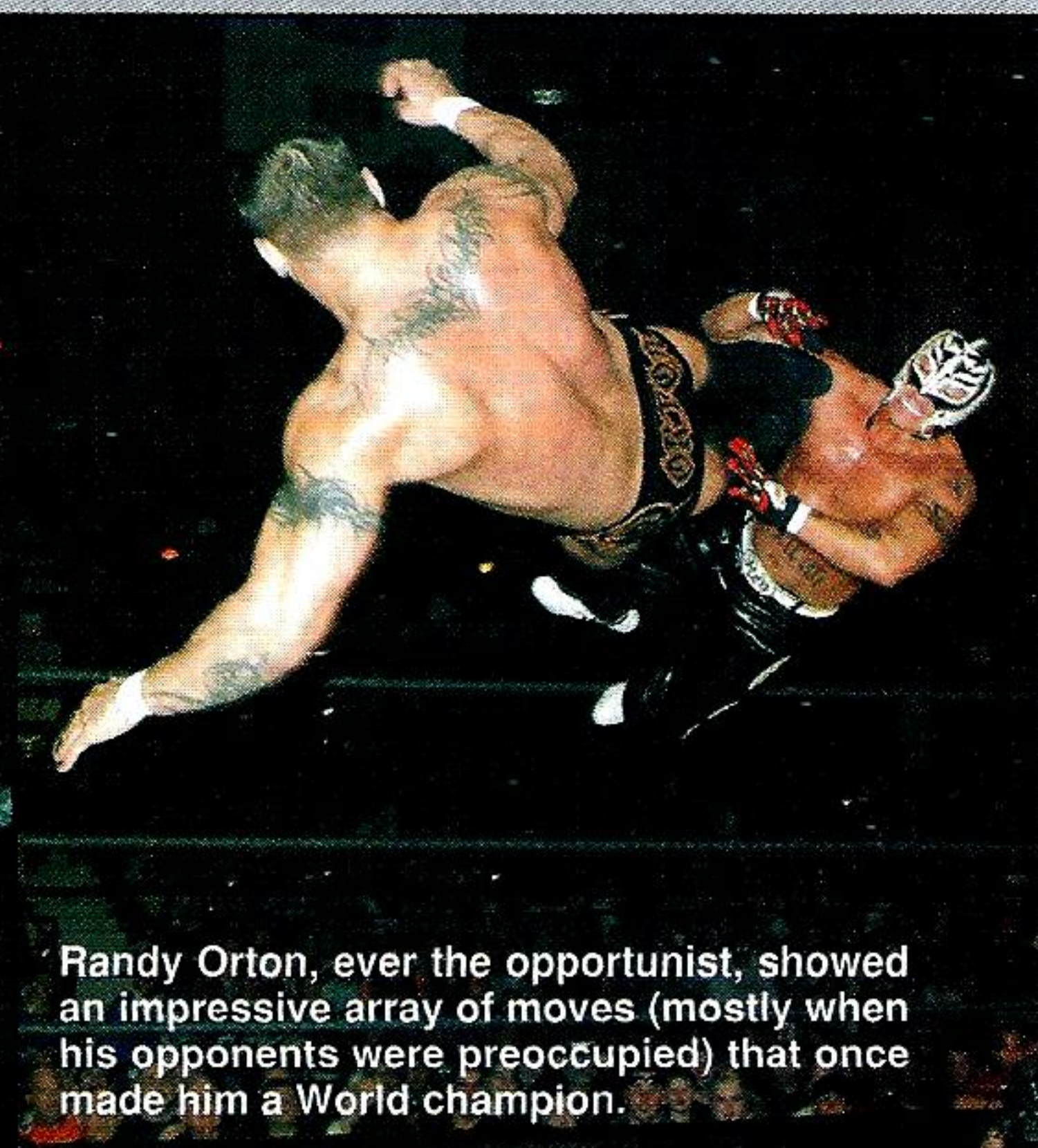
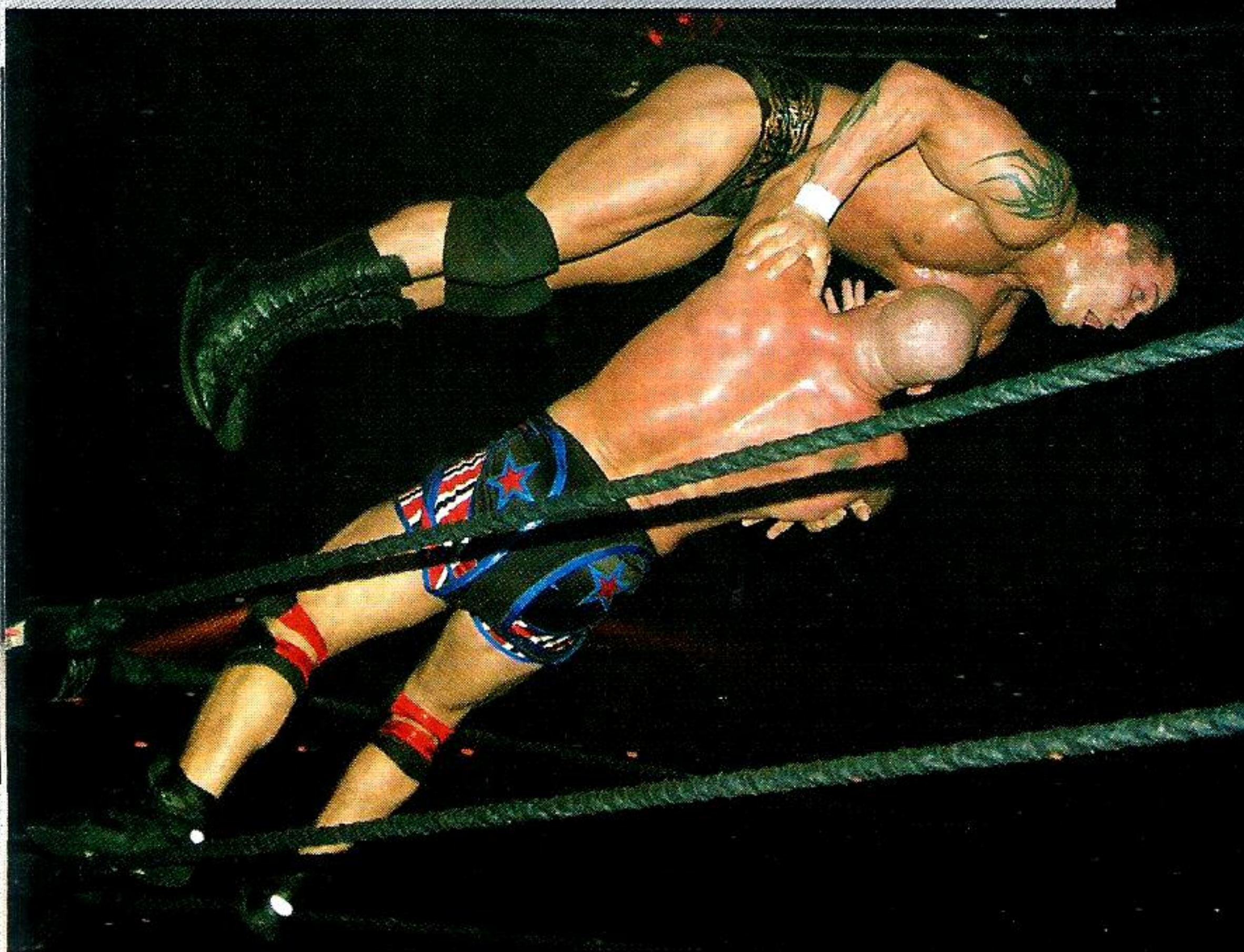
WHAT WENT DOWN: The pace was ferocious, with Angle gradually gaining the upper hand on both opponents. Seizing advantage of multiple one-on-one situations, Angle was able to clamp both Misterio and Orton in the anklelock, causing each one to tap-out.

Unfortunately for Angle, however, the referee was distracted both times and was unaware that the match should have ended.

The match ended after a dizzying array of moves that saw the champion deliver the "Angle Slam" to Misterio, sending him out of the ring. After incapacitating Orton with the same maneuver, Angle turned his attention again to Misterio, who had made his way back inside the squared circle. Misterio reversed the champion's attempted finishing move into an armdrag, sending Angle to the outside. After a 619 followed by the West Coast pop legdrop on Orton, Rey Misterio Jr. was the new World champion.

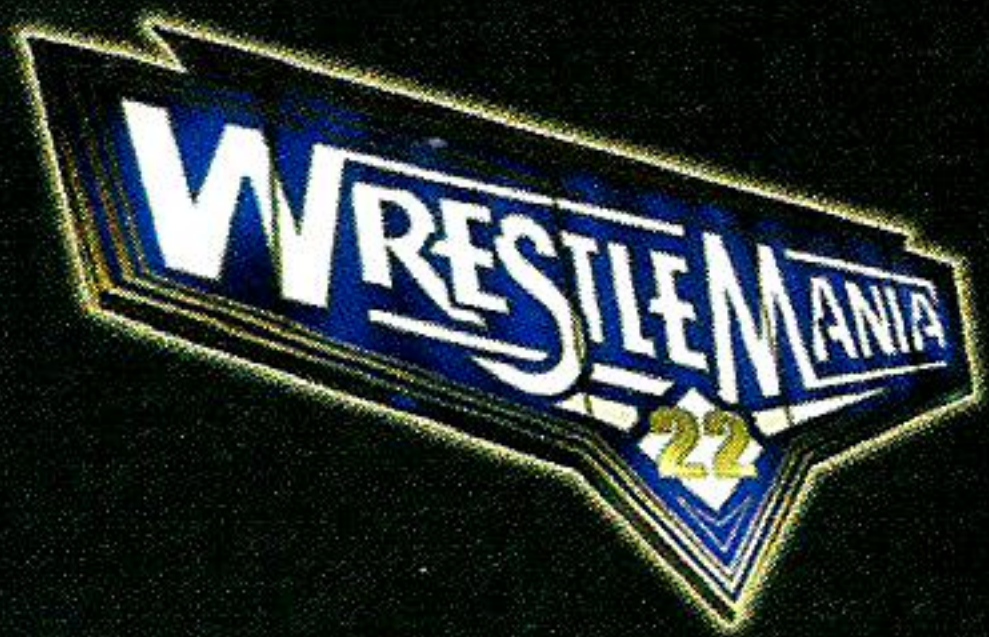


WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE: Depending on whom you ask, Misterio's historic title victory was either a move in the right direction for WWE, or cheap pandering to its fan base. Misterio, officially the shortest world champion in the company's history, was the quintessential underdog coming into the match. The same people that were cheering him on most likely didn't believe there was an actual chance of him winning the title.



Randy Orton, ever the opportunist, showed an impressive array of moves (mostly when his opponents were preoccupied) that once made him a World champion.

From a pure wrestling standpoint, Kurt Angle dominated Smackdown's three-way main event match. The champion mixed an effective combination of high-impact maneuvers with grinding mat holds. It appeared as if Angle would successfully defend the World title when both opponents tapped out to his anklelock outside of the referee's view.



CINCHING ON THE ANKLELOCK!

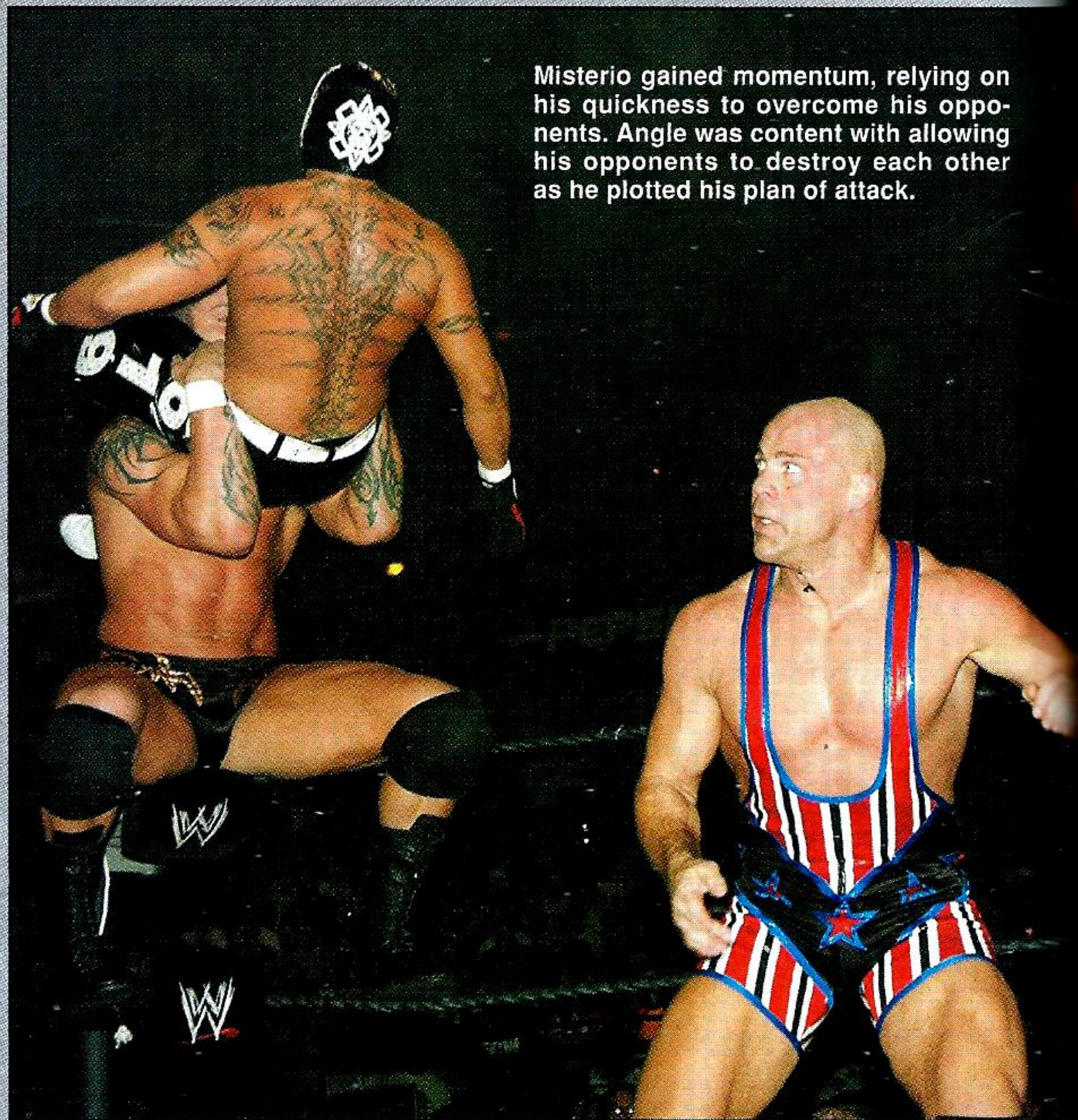
Rey Mysterio Jr. vs. Randy Orton vs. Kurt Angle



When the referee's hand hit the mat for the final time, with Misterio covering Randy Orton, the scrutiny of the victory began. When the newly crowned champion was met by Chavo and Vickie Guerrero (Eddie's widow) at the top of the entrance ramp, that same speculation turned to knowing discomfort. Whether it is justified or not, the general opinion of fans has been that much of Misterio's success has been attributed to his close alliance with the late Eddie Guerrero. Regardless of the veracity of that opinion, Misterio's first reign as World champion will unfortunately be shrouded in as much mystery as the man himself. This could lead to backlash from the fan base against the champion.

Based on his loss and subsequent 60-day suspension for "unprofessional conduct," WWE may be coming to the realization that Orton may not be the hope for the future they believed him to be. Since becoming the youngest world champion in the history of WWE, Orton has struggled to regain the momentum and fan support he enjoyed prior to his run as champion. This does not bode well for the company, as many on the inside believed that Orton would be the torchbearer for years to come.

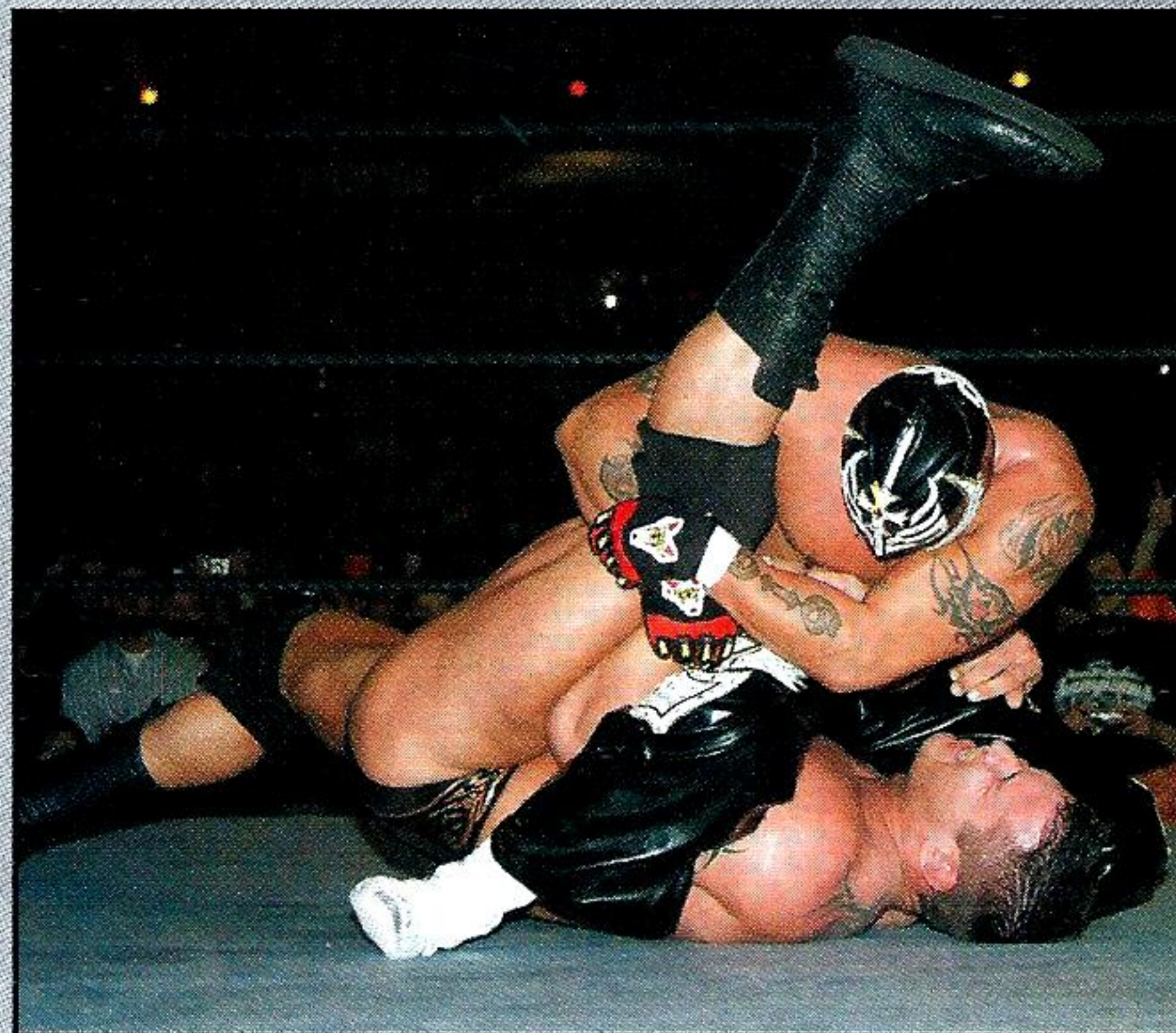
Perhaps the man who should be most livid with the result of this match is Angle. When Batista went



Misterio gained momentum, relying on his quickness to overcome his opponents. Angle was content with allowing his opponents to destroy each other as he plotted his plan of attack.

down with a triceps tear in early-2006, Angle stepped up—either opportunistically or valiantly—and captured Smackdown's top prize. Abandoning his rulebreaking ways, Angle became the epitome of a fighting champion, defending the title

with intensity never before seen from the gold medalist. At WrestleMania, he lost the title without being pinned or forced into submission. How he reacts will be worth keeping an eye on.



With Kurt Angle reeling on the floor, Misterio took advantage of a one-on-one matchup with Orton, nailing the 619 (above) and West Coast Pop legdrop. Misterio's lifelong dream became a reality when he covered Randy Orton for the three-count, becoming the World champion (left).



DESTINY FULFILLED!

Rey Mysterio Jr. vs. Randy Orton vs. Kurt Angle



TORRIE WILSON **VS** CANDICE MICHELLE

➔ **HOW WE GOT HERE:** Both women have been part of the wave of WWE Divas to pose for popular men's magazine *Playboy*, with Candice being the March 2006 covergirl. The two were allies in a group with Victoria known collectively as "Vince's Devils." However, when the spotlight was shone primarily on Candice and her pending pictorial with *Playboy*, the Diva truly began to earn that hellish moniker. Sensing that Torrie was jealous of her success, Candice turned against her former ally, leading to this match.

➔ **WHAT WENT DOWN:** What was billed as a "pillow fight" was actually two gorgeous women rolling around in the bed Edge and Lita made famous, stripping each other down. This won't be a Match of the Year candidate. For those of you keeping score at home, Torrie won by pinfall.

➔ **WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE:** As much as the Mickie

James-Trish Stratus match earlier in the evening did to further the women's division, this match may have had the opposite effect. It's no secret that WWE does not require extensive ring expertise of its Divas, yet it is gimmick matches like this that help to ensure that women who actually have talent will not be taken as seriously as they should be.

While gratuitous female partial-nudity has pretty much become a mainstay of WWE programming, this was certainly not a WrestleMania-worthy match. Falling between Rey Mysterio Jr.'s historic championship victory and the highly anticipated Hunter-Cena WWE title match, the "Playboy Pillow-Fight" had no shot at keeping the crowd's attention, shy of the potential for slippage. Yet, it's understood that this match was used to divert the crowd's attention from the elaborate entrance being set up for the proceeding main event.

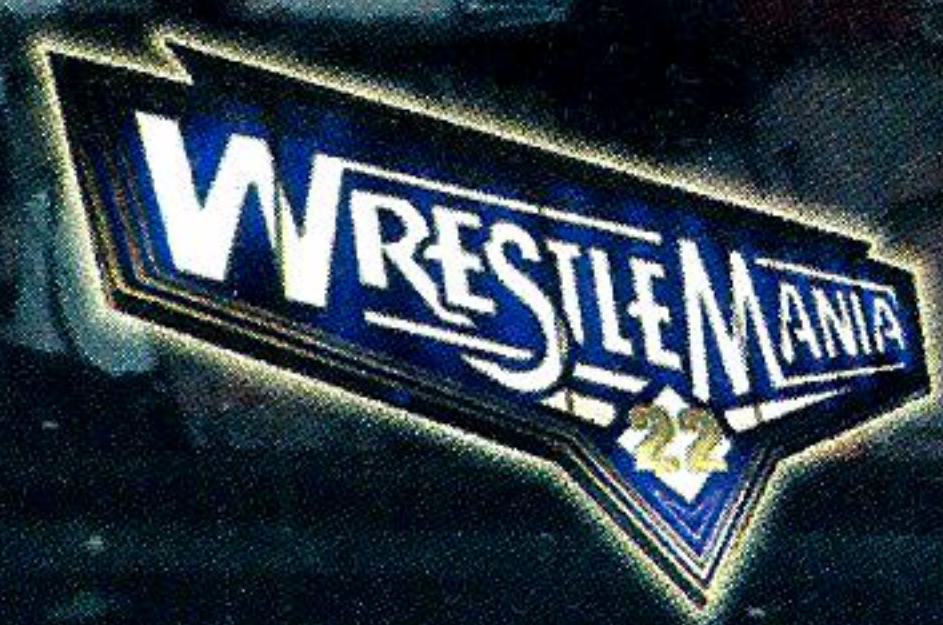
The claws were out when Torrie Wilson met Candice Michelle in WrestleMania's first "Playboy Pillow-Fight" match. Torrie emerged as the winner.





NO PILLOWS NECESSARY

Torrie Wilson vs. Candice Michelle



TRIPLE-H JOHN CENA



HOW WE GOT HERE: With Triple-H not much of a factor in the WWE championship picture, Cena was able to dominate the Raw brand since his surprise selection to the roster during the annual draft. Cena's sole setback came at the hands of Edge, who captured the title, cashing in his "money-in-the-bank" title shot following Cena's hard-fought victory in an elimination chamber match at New Year's Revolution. Cena, however, would regain the strap a mere three weeks later at the Royal Rumble.

Triple-H's path to WrestleMania was drastically different. The number-one entry in the Royal Rumble match, Hunter actually had an opportunity to win the event, before finishing in third place. However, his promise of headlining WrestleMania 22 came to fruition as he won a "Road To WrestleMania" tournament on *Raw* to become the number-one contender to the WWE title.

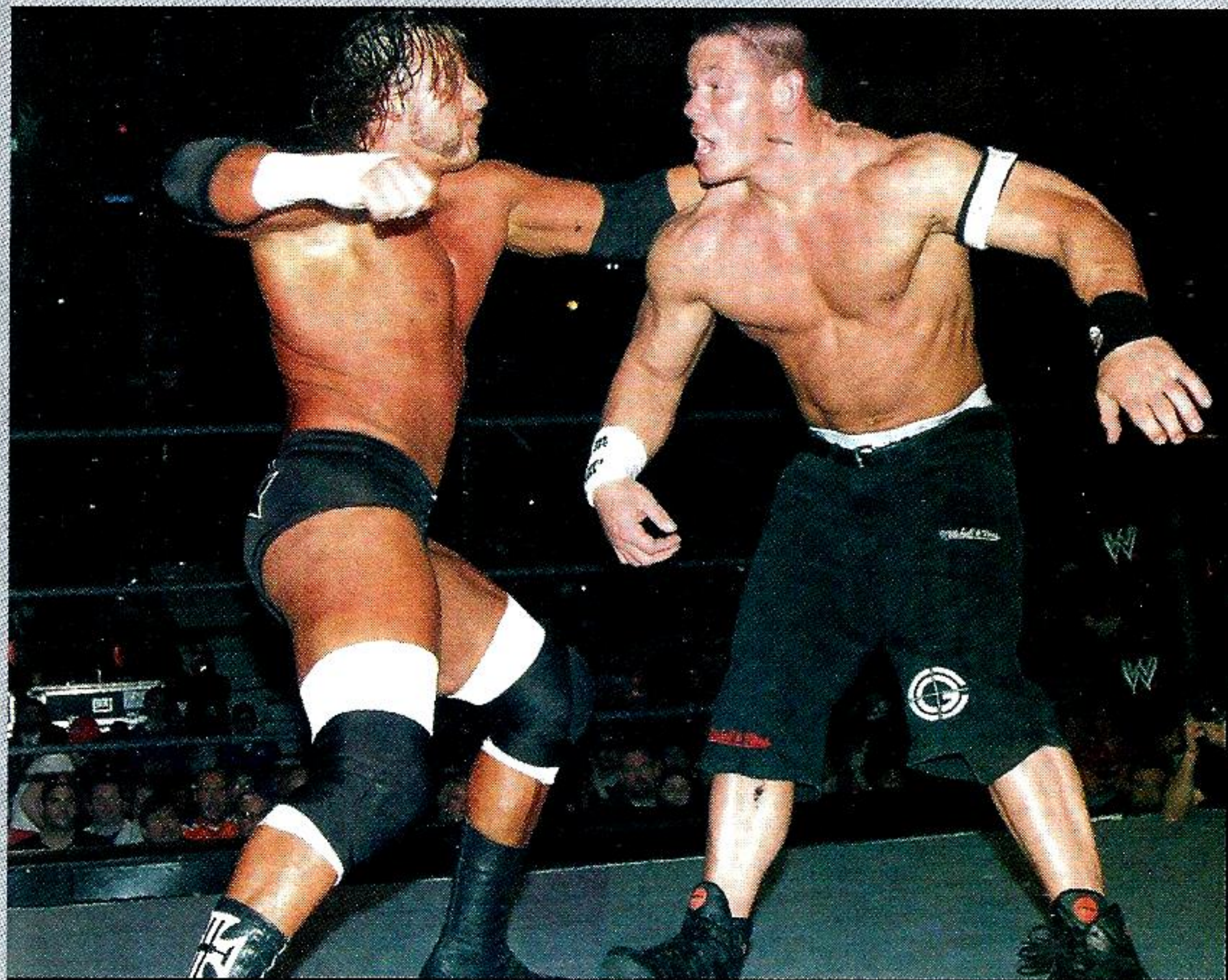


WHAT WENT DOWN: The match was an interesting dichotomy of wrestling styles and personas. Hunter came off as the over-confident jerk that had an answer for every move Cena attempted. Conversely, Cena appeared to be the young, overachiever who grew increasingly frustrated with each thwarted attempt.

As the contest progressed, Cena's confidence grew. Hunter was still dictating much of the flow, however Cena began matching him move-for-move, as well as cheap shot for cheap shot. The champion was showing signs of pure wrestling talent and a resolve that fans had not seen from him thus far in his career. As he began to dictate the flow of the match, the champion's sole miscue was his determination to use his ridiculous five-knuckle shuffle, which Hunter blocked.

Sensing he had the challenger reeling, Cena stalked Hunter hoping to catch him with his FU finisher. The ring savvy veteran instead ran Cena into the corner, taking out the referee in the process. With both Cena and the ref down, the fans were treated to some vintage Helmsley, as the challenger taunted Cena's "you can't see me" gesture by countering with a classic Degeneration X crotch chop.

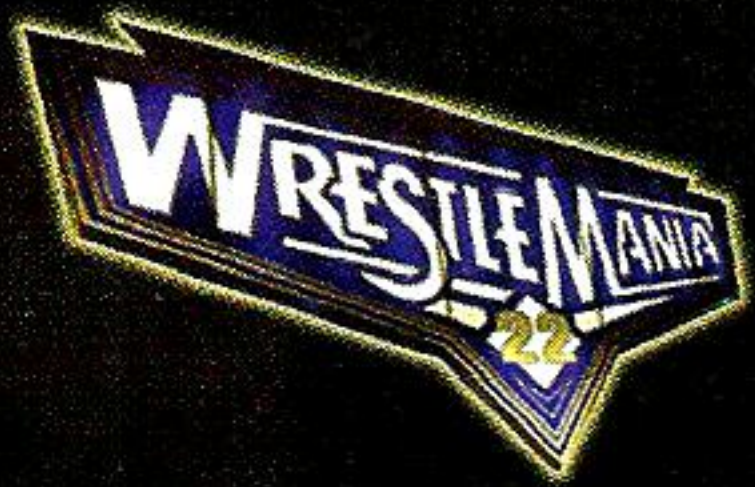
Hunter then made his way to the arena floor and returned to the ring with his trusty sledgehammer, ready to unceremoniously finish off Cena's second WWE title run. Cena avoided him initially, however "The Game" was able to level the champ with a sledgehammer shot to the head. Surprisingly, the challenger was only able to get a two-count.



Triple-H has achieved virtually everything a wrestler can in this business, yet his desire to become an 11-time world champion showed in his match with John Cena. Unfortunately for the "King Of Kings," it would be his trademark cockiness that would lead to his eventual undoing.

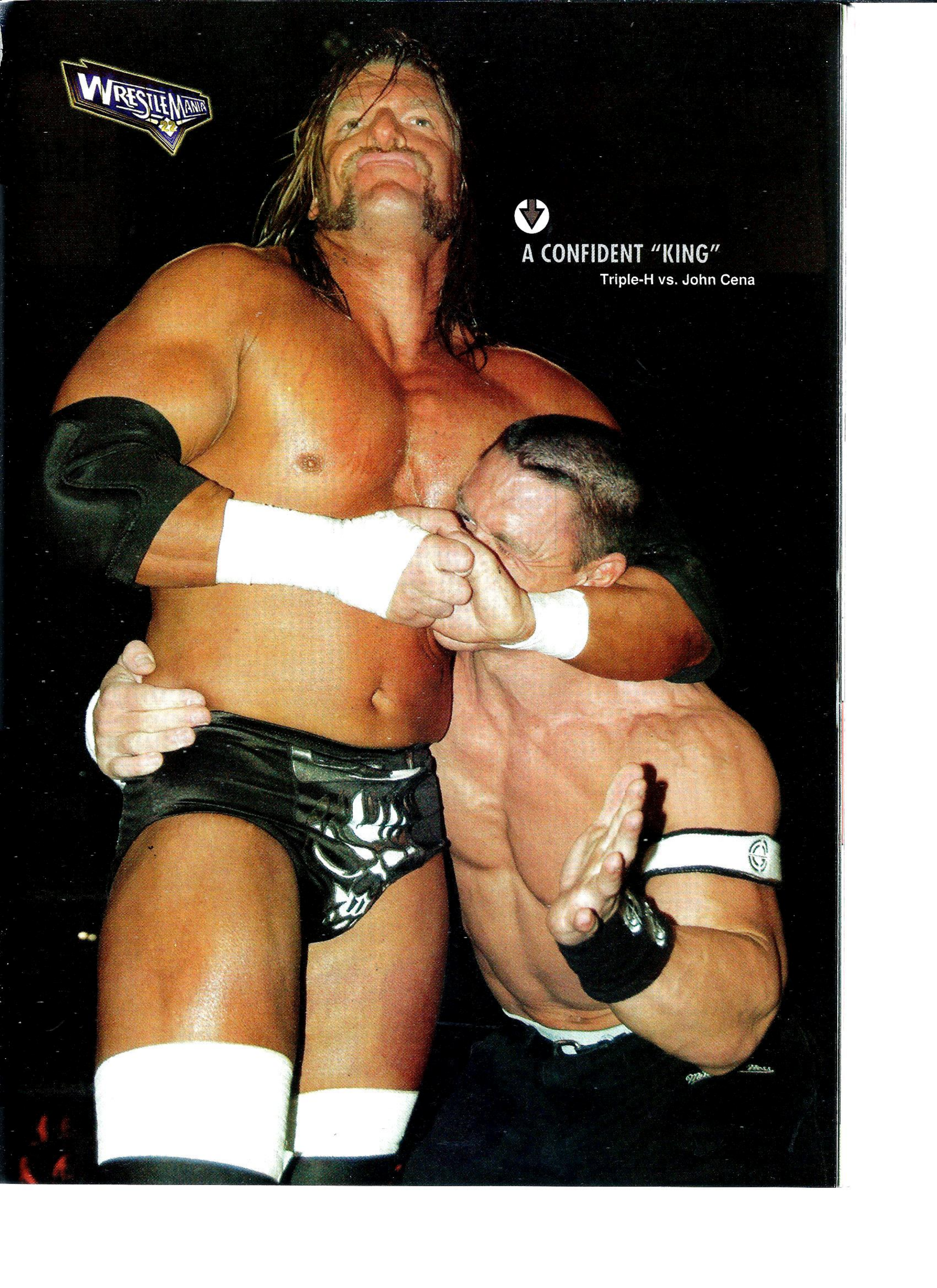
Cena was able to stave off one attack by Triple-H and his trusty sledgehammer, although the champion wasn't as fortunate later on. But Cena was able to recover from the later attack and mount a comeback of his own.





A CONFIDENT "KING"

Triple-H vs. John Cena

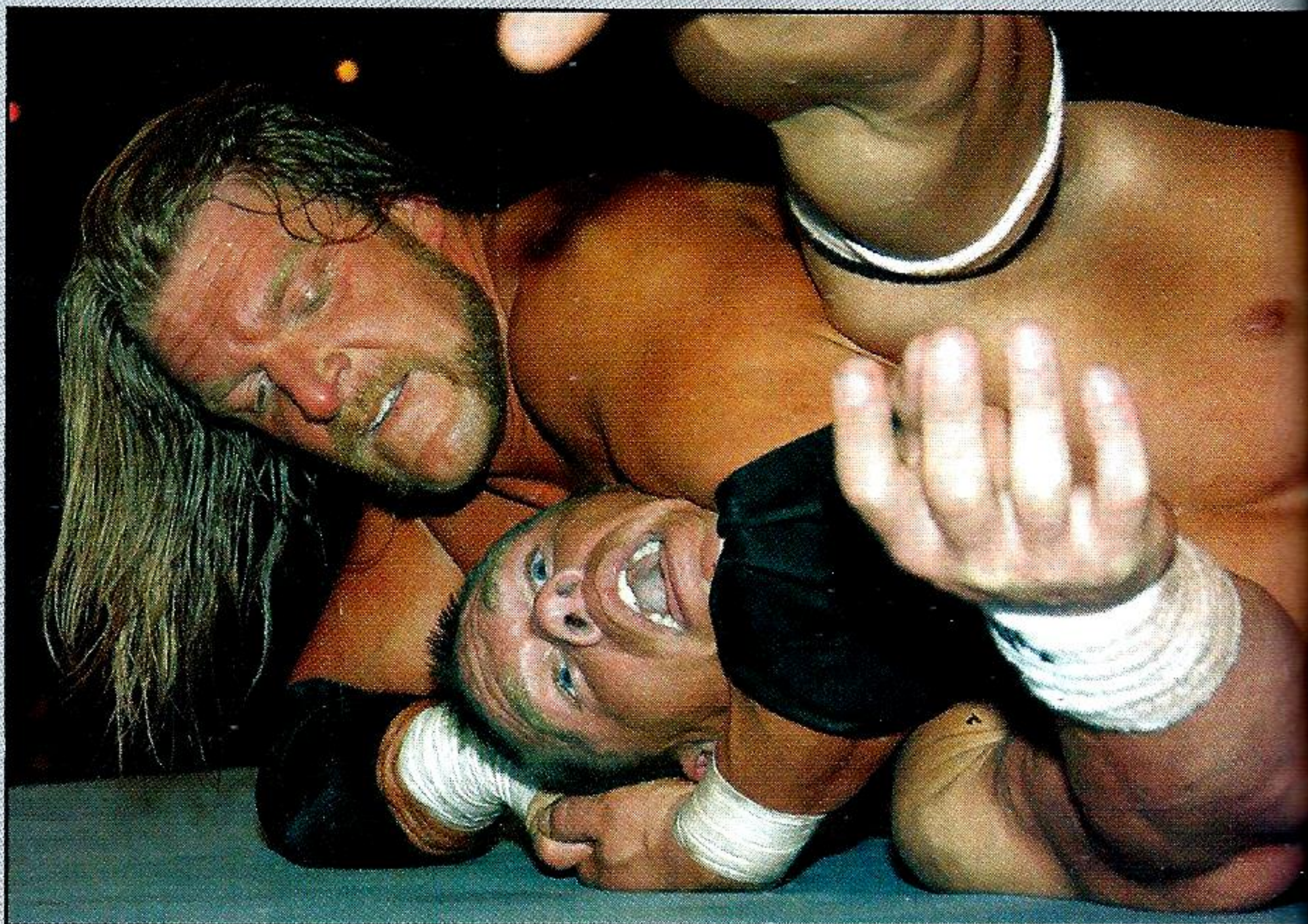


Following a sequence of moves, which saw Cena successfully land his FU only to get a two-count, Hunter again attempted to finish off Cena, this time with the pedigree. The champ, now wise to the challenger's repertoire of maneuvers, reversed the finisher into his STFU submission hold. While Hunter was able to answer the call when the ref dropped his arm for the third time, he could not withstand the pressure of the move. Triple-H tapped out to the STFU, and Cena retained the WWE title.



WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE: If the crowd reaction was any indicator, this match shows just how over Triple-H is with the fans and just how unwilling the fans are to accept Cena as WWE champion.

For the first time since becoming champion, Cena truly played the role of underdog, and not solely because of his perceived lack of in-ring ability. The crowd at the All-State Arena was really hot for Triple-H, and it seemed as if the challenger was destined to retake the title and rule over the Raw brand once again. Regardless of the tenacity showed by Cena, the vast majority of onlookers vociferously rejected him. Obscene chants directed at the champion were audible even to television viewers of the event. If the company plans to continue to invest its future with Cena, it has to act soon to restore consumer



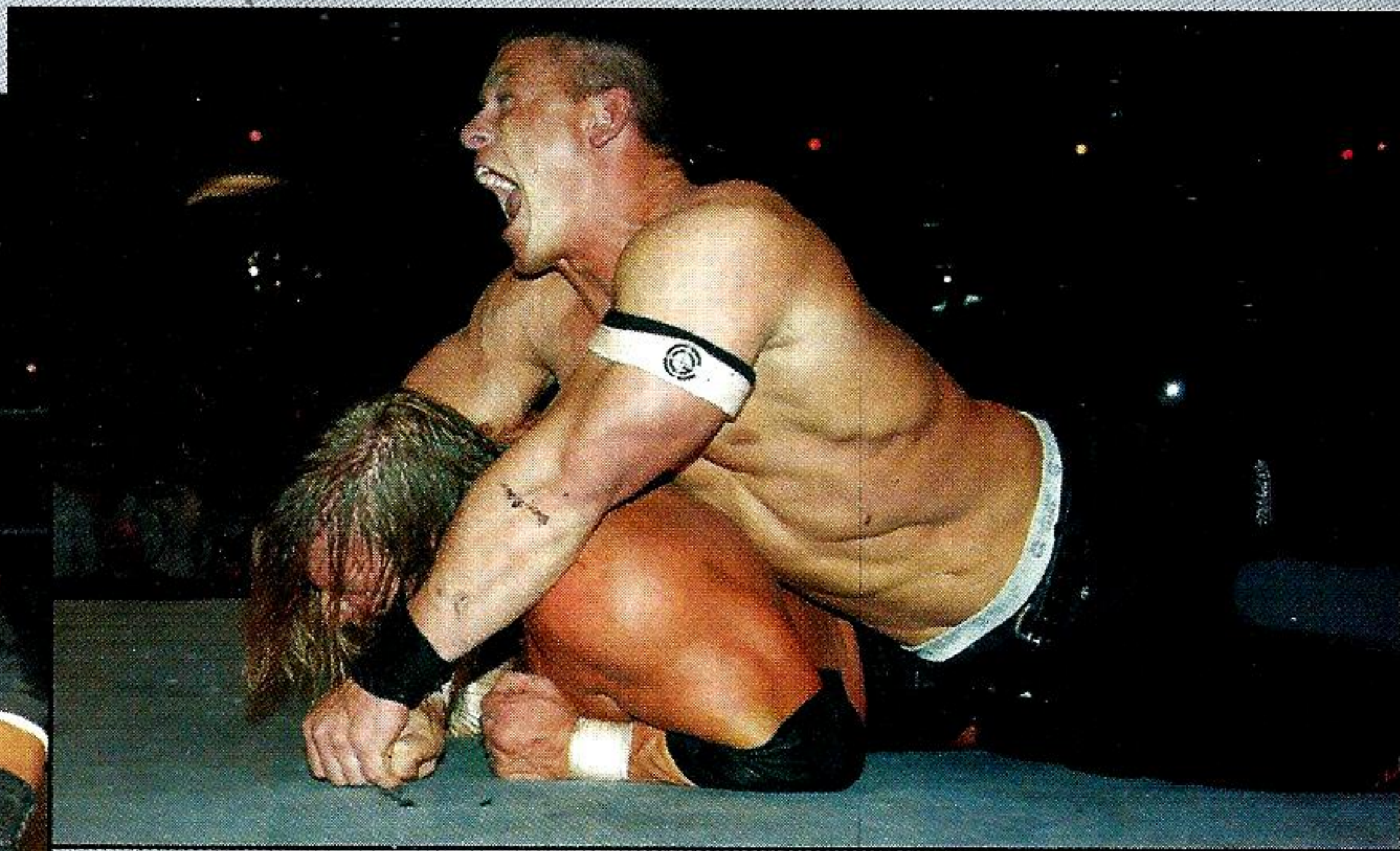
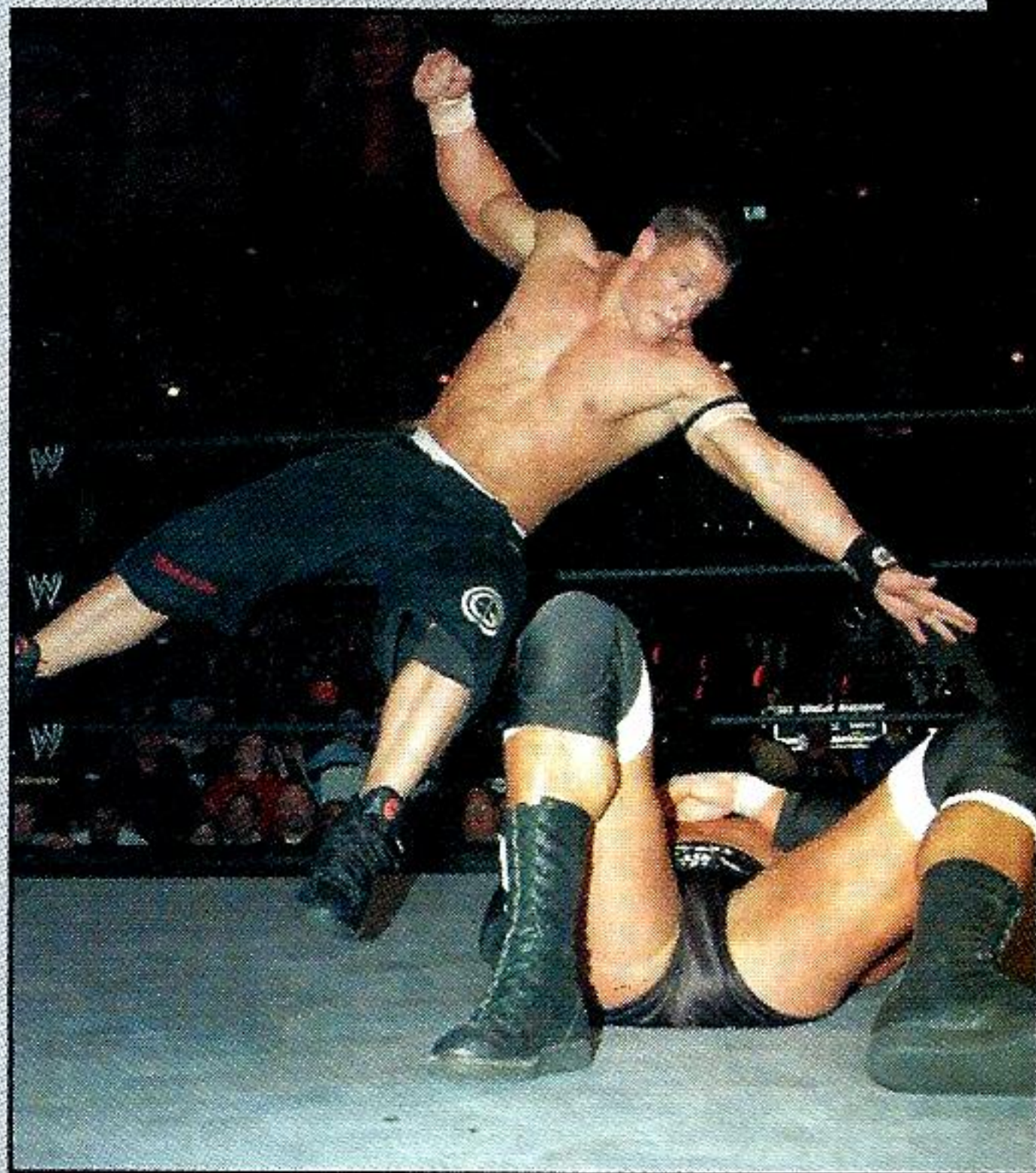
At times throughout the contest, Triple-H showed why he is widely considered to be one of the best wrestlers in the sport today.

confidence in the man.

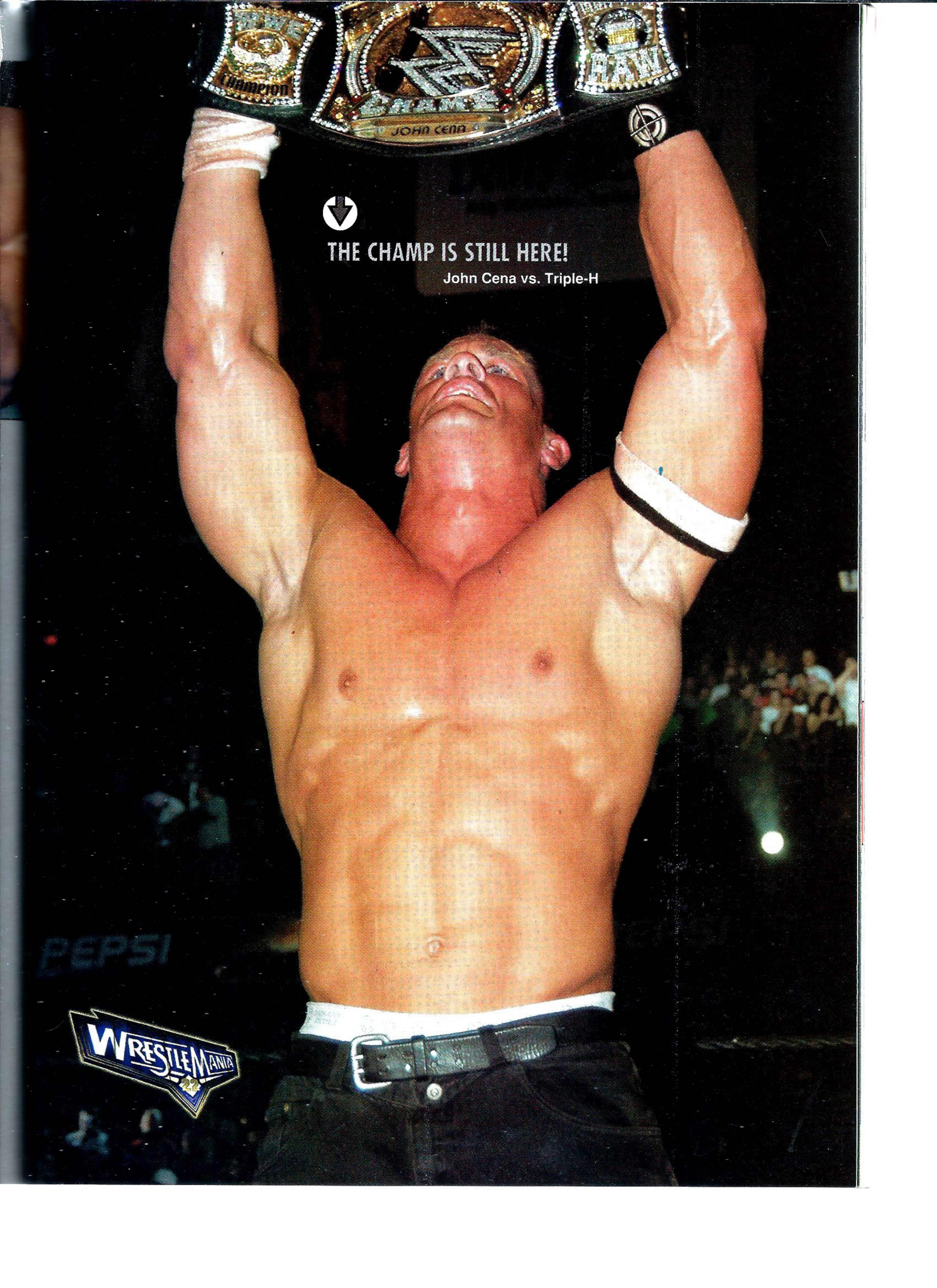
While it may be a stretch to make the comparison, the impact of this match is similar to that of The Boogeyman-Booker T contest earlier on the card. Cena's retention of the title probably did more to hurt him where it counts most—with the fans—rather than endear him to his harshest critics. Cena handled extreme adversity like a seasoned veteran, however his Hogan-esque "succeed no matter the odds" ability to win a match has grown tremendously stale with the

fans. There was a time that such a resiliency was lauded and glorified. Those days are gone, and now it just seems silly.

As for Triple-H, this match served to reinforce how he has become *the* ultimate bad guy for this generation of wrestlers, as well as how desperate WWE fans are for a change. Twenty years ago, virtually no one would be rooting for the hated Triple-H as he attempted to take the title away from ultra-babyface John Cena. Times have changed and so, apparently, must WWE.



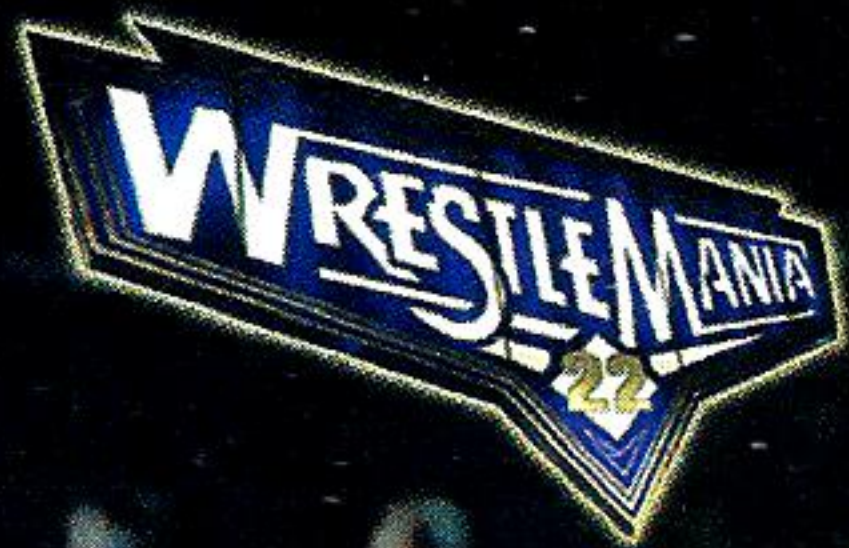
With the odds—and seemingly the fans—against him, Cena was able to overcome Triple-H's assault and land his trademark five-knuckle shuffle (left). The champion impressively finished off Triple-H with the STFU submission hold (above), retaining the WWE championship.



THE CHAMP IS STILL HERE!

John Cena vs. Triple-H

PEPSI



RANKING THE WRESTLEMANIAS



Not since WrestleMania XX has our staff sat down to debate where a WrestleMania fits on the event's all-time list. Six years prior to that, we created the essential catalog of 'Mania rankings. With some slight modifications, we proudly add WrestleMania 22 to the history books and give it its rightful place amongst all others.

1. **WrestleMania III:** Pontiac Silverdome, Pontiac, Michigan (March 29, 1987)
Main event: WWF World champion Hulk Hogan vs. Andre the Giant
2. **WrestleMania XIV:** FleetCenter, Boston, Massachusetts (March 29, 1998)
Main event: WWF World champion Shawn Michaels vs. Steve Austin
3. **WrestleMania XII:** Arrowhead Pond, Anaheim, California (March 31, 1996)
Main event: WWF World champion Bret Hart vs. Shawn Michaels
4. **WrestleMania IX:** Caesars Palace, Las Vegas, Nevada (April 4, 1993)
Main event: WWF World champion Bret Hart vs. Yokozuna
5. **WrestleMania 21:** Staples Center, Los Angeles, California (April 3, 2005)
Main event: World champion Triple-H vs. Batista
6. **WrestleMania X:** Madison Square Garden, New York, New York (March 20, 1994)
Main event: WWF World champion Yokozuna vs. Bret Hart
7. **WrestleMania IV:** Trump Plaza, Atlantic City, New Jersey (March 27, 1988)
Main event: Randy Savage vs. Ted DiBiase in WWF World title tournament final
8. **WrestleMania II:** Nassau Coliseum, Uniondale, New York/Rosemont Horizon, Rosemont, Illinois/Los Angeles Sports Arena, Los Angeles, California (April 7, 1986)
Main event: WWF World champion Hulk Hogan vs. King Kong Bundy
9. **WrestleMania XIX:** Safeco Field, Seattle, Washington (March 30, 2003)
Main event: WWE champion Kurt Angle vs. Brock Lesnar
10. **WrestleMania XIII:** Rosemont Horizon, Rosemont, Illinois (March 23, 1997)
Main event: WWF World champion Sid Vicious vs. The Undertaker
11. **WrestleMania XVI:** Arrowhead Pond, Anaheim, California (April 2, 2000)
Main event: Triple-H vs. The Rock vs. Mick Foley vs. The Big Show
12. **WrestleMania VII:** Los Angeles Sports Arena, Los Angeles, California (March 24, 1991)
Main event: WWF World champion Sgt. Slaughter vs. Hulk Hogan
13. **WrestleMania XX:** Madison Square Garden, New York, New York (March 14, 2004)
Main event: World champion Triple-H vs. Chris Benoit vs. Shawn Michaels
14. **WrestleMania X7:** Astrodome, Houston, Texas (April 1, 2001)
Main event: WWF World champion The Rock vs. Steve Austin
15. **WrestleMania XI:** Hartford Civic Center, Hartford, Connecticut (April 2, 1995)
Main event: Bam Bam Bigelow vs. Lawrence Taylor
16. **WrestleMania VIII:** Hoosier Dome, Indianapolis, Indiana (April 5, 1992)
Main event: Hulk Hogan vs. Sid Justice
17. **WrestleMania VI:** SkyDome, Toronto, Ontario (April 1, 1990)
Main event: WWF World champion Hulk Hogan vs. The Ultimate Warrior
18. **WrestleMania I:** Madison Square Garden, New York, New York (March 31, 1985)
Main event: WWF World champion Hulk Hogan & Mr. T vs. Paul Orndorff & Roddy Piper
19. **WrestleMania V:** Trump Plaza, Atlantic City, New Jersey (April 2, 1989)
Main event: WWF World champion Randy Savage vs. Hulk Hogan
20. **WrestleMania 22:** Allstate Arena, Chicago, Illinois (April 2, 2006)
Main event: WWE champion John Cena vs. Triple-H
21. **WrestleMania X8:** SkyDome, Toronto, Ontario (March 17, 2002)
Main event: Undisputed champion Chris Jericho vs. Triple-H
22. **WrestleMania XV:** First Union Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (March 28, 1999)
Main event: WWF champion The Rock vs. Steve Austin

FATHER KNOWS BEST



Since forming an alliance with the James Mitchell, Abyss has seemingly forfeited all control over the future of his own wrestling career. Mitchell is the puppeteer pulling the proverbial strings, and Abyss is the marionette.

By Bill Meltzer

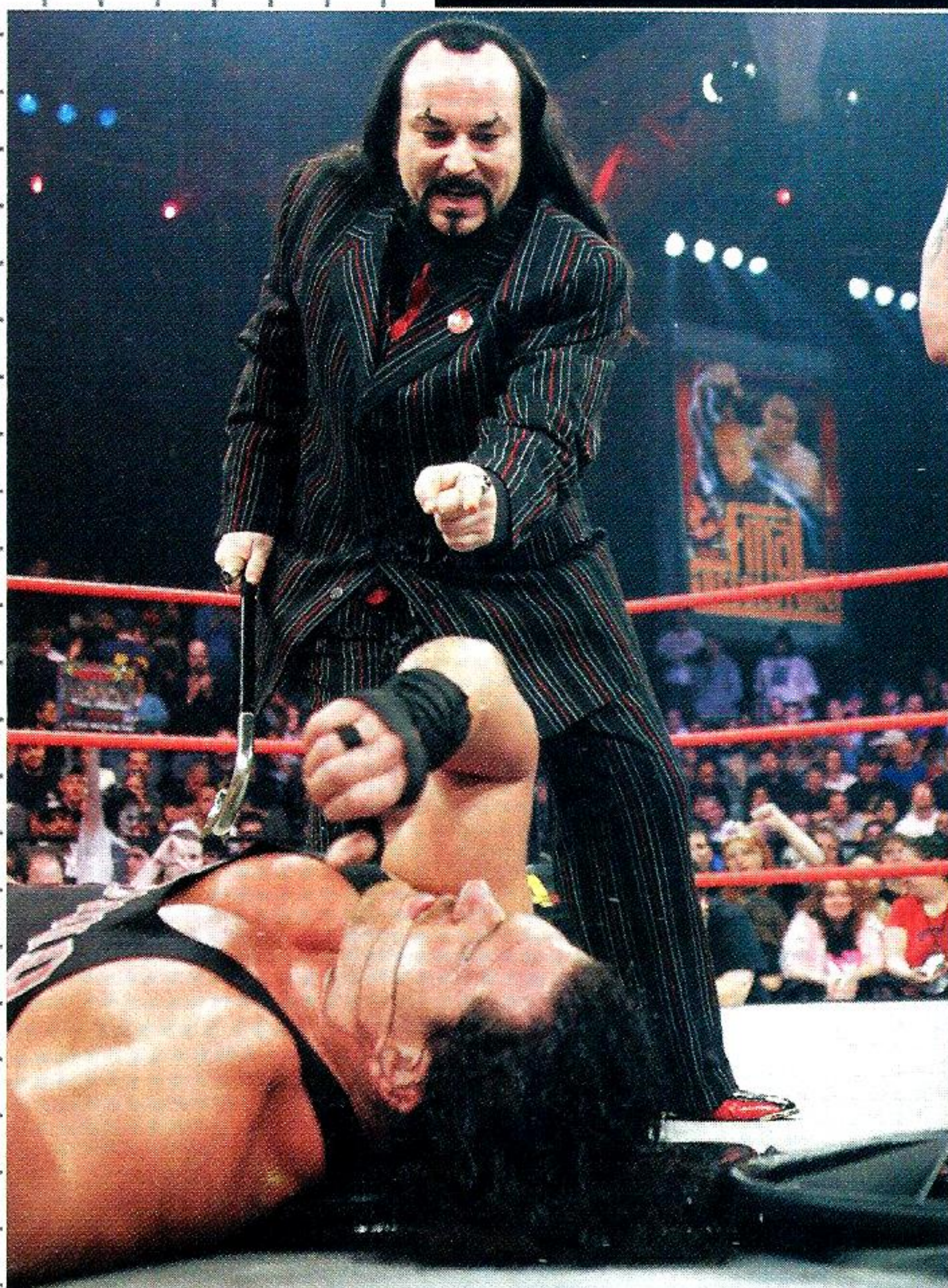
ONE LOOKS LIKE the product of a bizarre genetic experiment to blend Kevin Sullivan in his Satanist days with thinner versions of Paul Bearer and Sir Oliver Humperdink. The other resembles a blend of old school Kane and Mankind. Together, they make for a dangerous duo that threatens to take control of TNA.

The silent beast known as Abyss has become even more violent and destructive in and out of the ring since aligning himself with Father James Mitchell. He's won a lot—to the point that he became the biggest threat to Christian Cage's prospects for a lengthy NWA title reign. But he's paid a price for his success. While Mitchell has helped bring direction to Abyss' once staccato career path, he's also suppressed any semblance of self-determination. Abyss has seemingly lost all control over his own career, and he may never get it back. Whatever good, if any, lies deep within Abyss' soul has been firmly suppressed by his manager, quite possibly forever.

Case in point: The videotaped incident a few months back that saw Abyss attack Cage at his home after the NWA champion spotted Mitchell and Alex Shelley stalking his wife. At Mitchell's command, Abyss dragged Cage through his house and threw him into his swimming pool. Just as it appeared Abyss would drown Cage, he

Why Abyss May Never Break Free from James Mitchell





Besides his role as Abyss' manager and decision-maker, Mitchell has also taken on the duty of mouthpiece. The perpetually silent 350-pound creature is limited to grunts and groans.

stopped. Abyss then pulled Christian from the water and set him down on the deck before leaving.

Mitchell, who frequently uses the first person plural when referring to Abyss, readily admits masterminding that attack from start to finish. "Whether Cage likes it or not, I'm going to make him give us the title shot we deserve," he says. "As soon as Cage won the belt from [Jeff] Jarrett, he started ducking us, running off to make TV commercials and movies. Why did we back off? I want Cage healthy enough to feel the pain as we set him up for the Black Hole Slam. I want him alert enough to hear us pin him in the center of the ring. I want to see him look up as we walk off with our belt. That's why."

The ploy worked. Abyss leapfrogged former champion Jarrett and prior top contender Monty Brown to get to the front of the line for a series of shots at Cage.

Some experts say winning the belt could be the worst thing that could happen to Abyss. Unlike, say, The Road Warriors and Paul Ellering, the Abyss-Mitchell partnership is not an equal one. Mitchell had once forced Abyss into a feud with Sabu and an alliance with Jarrett in order to strengthen his own status in TNA and eliminate his most dangerous enemies.

The only thing Abyss stood to gain from the carnage was the opportunity to inflict—and receive—a lot of needless agony.

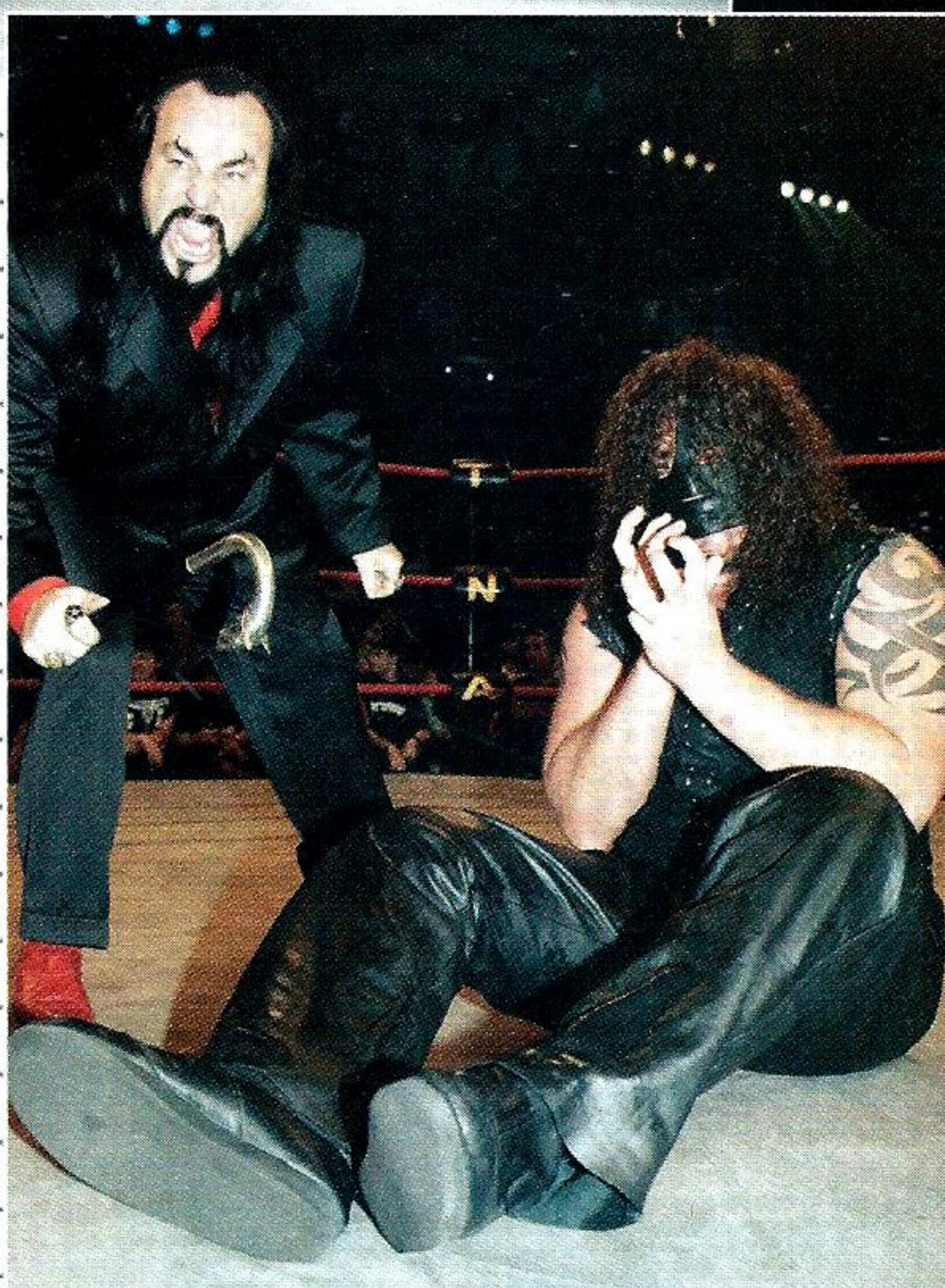
If the 6'10" challenger were to succeed in taking the NWA title with Mitchell's assistance, he may forever be indebted to the manager. Mitchell already does all the talking for Abyss and handles his bookings.

Putting the title belt on the masked monster will truly exert Mitchell's total control over Abyss' every move and thought. Abyss may well spend the prime of his career doing Mitchell's bidding. The manager already knows he has a weapon of mass destruction at his disposal.

Add a title reign to the mix and it's unlikely Mitchell will relinquish his grip anytime soon. While others definitely hold an advantage in terms of wrestling repertoire and aerial ability, Abyss maintains a massive size and power advantage to compliment considerable bloodlust.

Attempts to reach Abyss were unsuccessful. All calls were immediately forwarded to voice mail—Mitchell's. Days later, the manager finally returned the call.

"All you need to know is that we're perfectly set up to own this sport," bragged Mitchell. "I've got the sharpest mind in the business, and I've got the ultimate ultra violent force to



While Mitchell appears to be Abyss' most dependable ally, it is hard to determine whether he cares more about his minion or the potential glory that becoming NWA champion would bring.

unleash whenever I want on whomever I want. Who's going to stop us?"

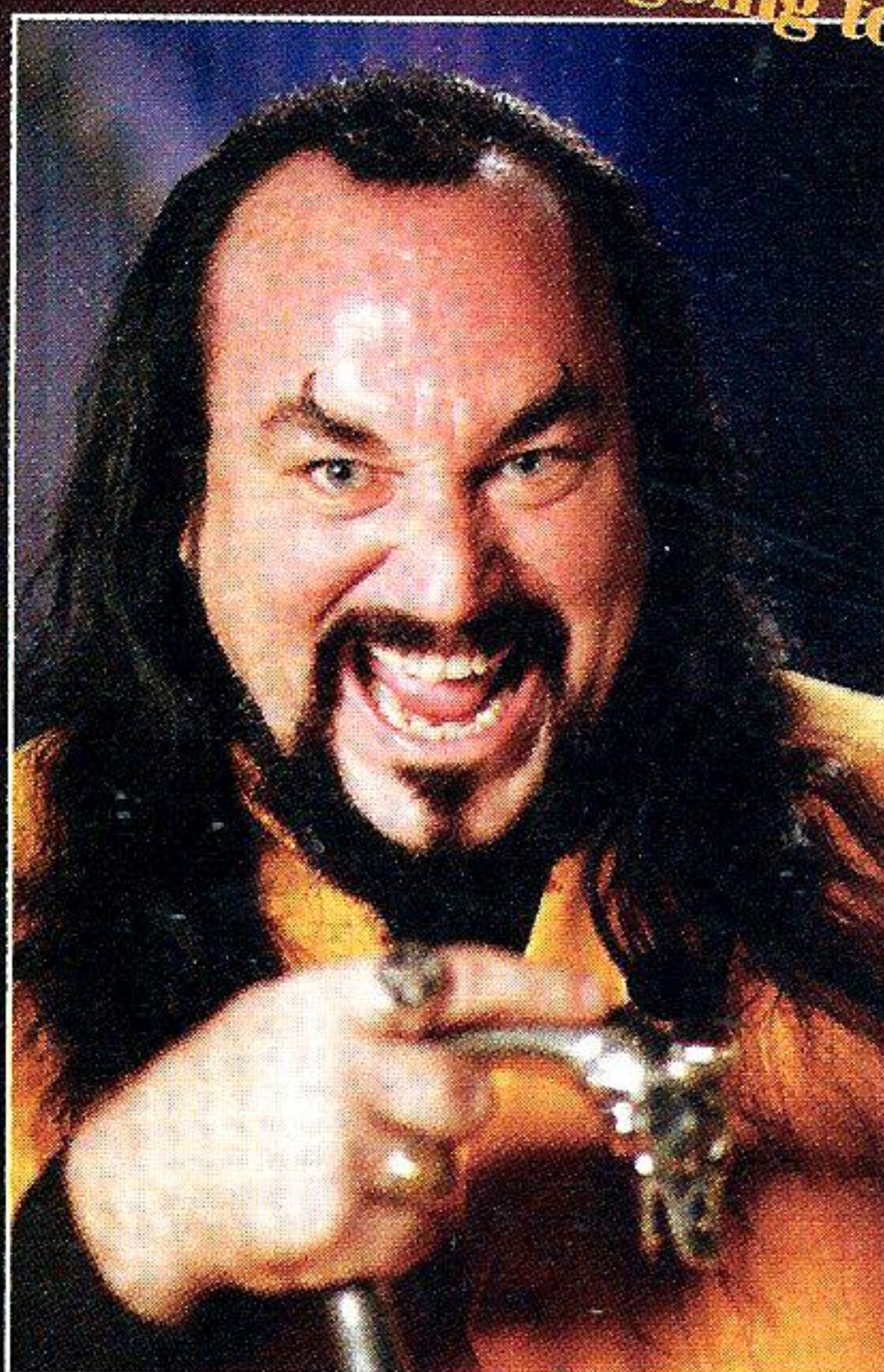
Publicly, the NWA champion has put on a brave face. And he's not above using psychological warfare of his own.

"Look, I know the way Mitchell rolls. From day one, I've seen what he's trying to do. So it's better off that I get Abyss out of the way sooner, rather than later. They have no idea what I have in store for *them*," says Cage. "Abyss is one weird dude. He's plenty dangerous. He's also brainless. He's pretty much let himself become Mitchell's puppet. I've faced plenty of big wrestlers before and always done fine."

To counteract Cage's technical superiority, Mitchell has tried to goad the champion into signing on for matches where the name of the game is to inflict punishment, rather than to outwrestle one's opponent. The steel cage title match at the TNA Lockdown pay-per-view was just the first of an increasingly violent series of matches Cage has agreed to fight with Abyss.

"Why not go straight to those kinds of matches? It actually works to my advantage this way," says Captain Charisma.

All you need to know is that we're perfectly set up to own this sport. I've got the sharpest mind in the business, and I've got the ultimate ultra violent force to unleash whenever I want on whoever I want. Who's going to stop us?



"Mitchell has to lay all his cards on the table from the start. He isn't one-quarter as smart as he thinks he is. If we started with traditional matches, he'd just interfere anyway, and I couldn't get a clean finish. Better to just cut to the chase."

What if Abyss fails in his quest? Will Mitchell be there for him? Not surprisingly,

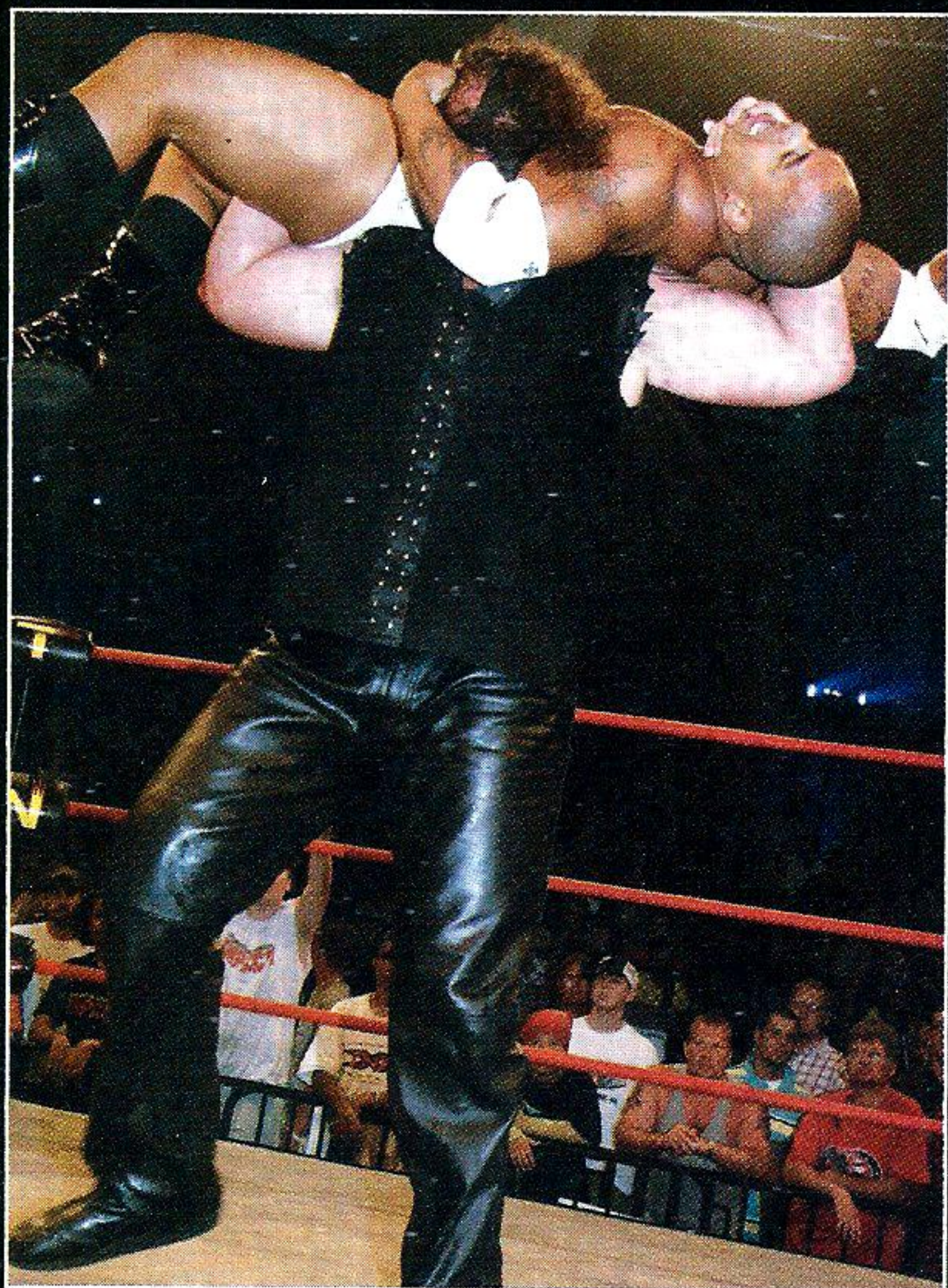
the long-haired, devilishly bearded manager is non-committal in his loyalty to Abyss. But he lets slip where his own concerns lie—and it's not in looking out for Abyss.

"There is no chance, none whatsoever, that we'll do anything other than destroy the champion and win the NWA title. Once we do that, we'll dominate this sport for a long, long time to come. Now, in terms of what could happen to the working relationship in some distant year, who knows what'll be best for me? Not even I can see that far in the future," says Mitchell.

So complete is Mitchell's hold on Abyss that even the semi-retired Sullivan has taken notice from afar. Noted for the mind control he exhibited over his charges in Florida and the Mid-Atlantic, Sullivan recently told *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* that he admires what he's seen Mitchell do on TV.

"I love it, brotha, I love it," the Gamesmaster crowed in his heavy Boston accent. "It's a brilliant plan for Mitchell to follow the blueprint I originally created. I just wish I had someone like Abyss working for me back in the '80s. I'll tell ya this much, brotha—TNA is in deep trouble. Abyss is a real monstah."

That "monstah" may well become the next NWA heavyweight champion. It would be a travesty if the only one to benefit from such success is Mitchell, not the wrestler himself. □



Kevin Sullivan, a former "taskmaster" of the '80s, admires Abyss' destructive abilities. But brawls with such wrestlers as Siaki (shown here) leave many questioning whether or not those abilities would bring Abyss the NWA title without the leadership of Mitchell.

PERFECT 100!

By Dan Murphy

THE 10th ANNUAL Super 8 Tournament was a night of tradition, tribute, and a stunning upset.

The event was dedicated to the memory of former Super 8 contestant Jeffrey Peterson, who succumbed to cancer in 2002 at the age of 21. Jeff's mother and sister were on hand to view a touching video tribute and to thank the East Coast Wrestling Association fans for keeping Jeff in their thoughts and prayers.

For the second consecutive year, the card was held at the Greater Newark Boys and Girls Club in Newark, Delaware. The day's events started with a luncheon, featuring previous Super 8 tournament winners Ace Darling (1997), Simon Diamond

(1998), Christopher Daniels (2000 and 2004), Low Ki (2001), Donovan Morgan (2002), and Petey Williams (2005). The event was hosted by J.J. Dillon and attended by this year's participants, ECWA staff and alumni, and about 150 fans and media.

In his comments during the luncheon, Daniels hailed the Super 8 tournament as "the most prestigious tournament on the independent level in the world," noting that it had inspired the King of the Indies Tournament, which largely inspired Ring of Honor, and that neither could have existed without promoter Jim Kettner paving the way with Super 8.

Before the opening bell had rung, the tournament experienced its first setback. Participant Danny Daniels had to be pulled from the event

The 2006 Super 8 participants (back row, from left to right): Bryan Logan, Andre Lyon, Milano Collection AT, Charlie Haas, and Scott Lost; (front row, left to right): Xavier, Davey Richards, and Josh Daniels.



*Davey Richards Pulls Off The Upset At The **Super 8** Tournament*

Photos by Joe Zanolle



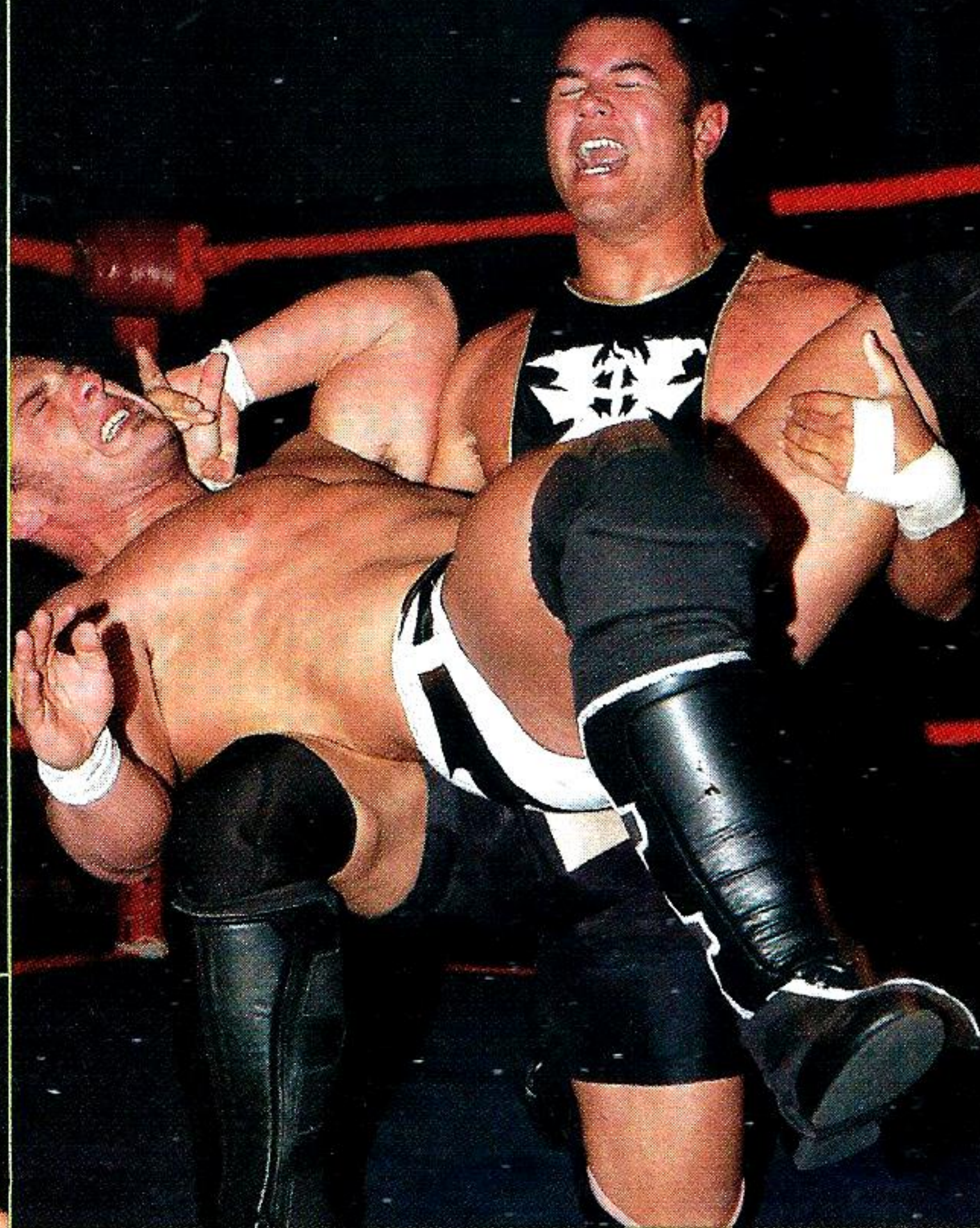
due to an injury that developed the night before the event; he was replaced by Super 8 alumnus Xavier. With the field of eight once again set, the 10th annual Super 8 got under way.

The opening battle between two West Coast competitors—California's Scott Lost and Washington's Davey Richards—set the tone early and was the consensus pick as match of the night. Lost and Richards started quickly by trading stiff kicks, with Richards rocking Lost with Toshiaki Kawada-inspired kicks to the breastbone and back.

Lost took over with brawling tactics outside the ring and, after a series of vicious elbows, suplexed Richards from the ring to the floor with a frightening fall. Incredibly, Richards recovered with a backcracker, which was followed by an Impaler DDT and a power bomb, but he was unable to score the pin. Lost turned the tide with an RKO variation and injured Richards with a brutal backbreaker. Targeting the back and ribs, Lost applied a sharpshooter, but Richards managed to escape. Richards finally scored the pin with a tiger driver.

The second match of the quarterfinals was Andre Lyonz squaring off with Josh Daniels. The contest started slowly, with each competitor feeling out each other. Soon the contest kicked into high gear with a stiff exchange of forearm smashes. Lyonz took the upper hand after dropping Daniels throat-first over the second rope and then connecting with a crisp dropkick to the top of Daniels' head. While Daniels enjoyed a modest weight advantage, he seemed to have trouble with the stockier Lyonz and his low center of gravity. Lyonz took over with a sitout uranage and fame-asser variation, but Daniels rallied with a full-nelson suplex to score the pinfall.

The third match had, without doubt, the most name recognition and featured two wrestlers who had something to prove: Xavier and Charlie. The match started quickly with a series of cradles for near-falls until Xavier slapped Haas in the face. Haas responded with a deafening slap and took over with a series of blistering chops. In an uncharacteristical-



The opening match of the night pitted Lost (applying the backbreaker) against eventual champion Richards. The back-and-forth contest saw many near falls and was widely considered to be the match of the night.



There was no lack of brute strength when Lyonz met up with Daniels (silver tights). Their match was arguably the most physical of the night, with both men countering each other with one vicious move after another.

ly high-risk move, Haas went to the top rope for a suicide dive, only to slip and land badly on the floor. The finish came with Xavier, seeking to offset Haas' size advantage, connecting with a springboard leg whip and a shooting star press,

but Haas would not be denied in front of the vocal fans. He scored the win with the Haas of Pain.

The final contest of the opening round pitted Bryan Logan, a homegrown ECWA talent, against Milano Collection AT, the flamboyant wannabe fashion model, accompanied by his invisible dog. Full of adrenaline, Logan took the early advantage with a swinging uranage backbreaker and neckbreaker, until Milano hooked him with his paradise lock (a modified octopus). Logan made it to the ropes and then rallied with a series of chops and a tornado DDT. But Logan made a tactical mistake and missed an Alabama jam from the top. Milano hit a corkscrew

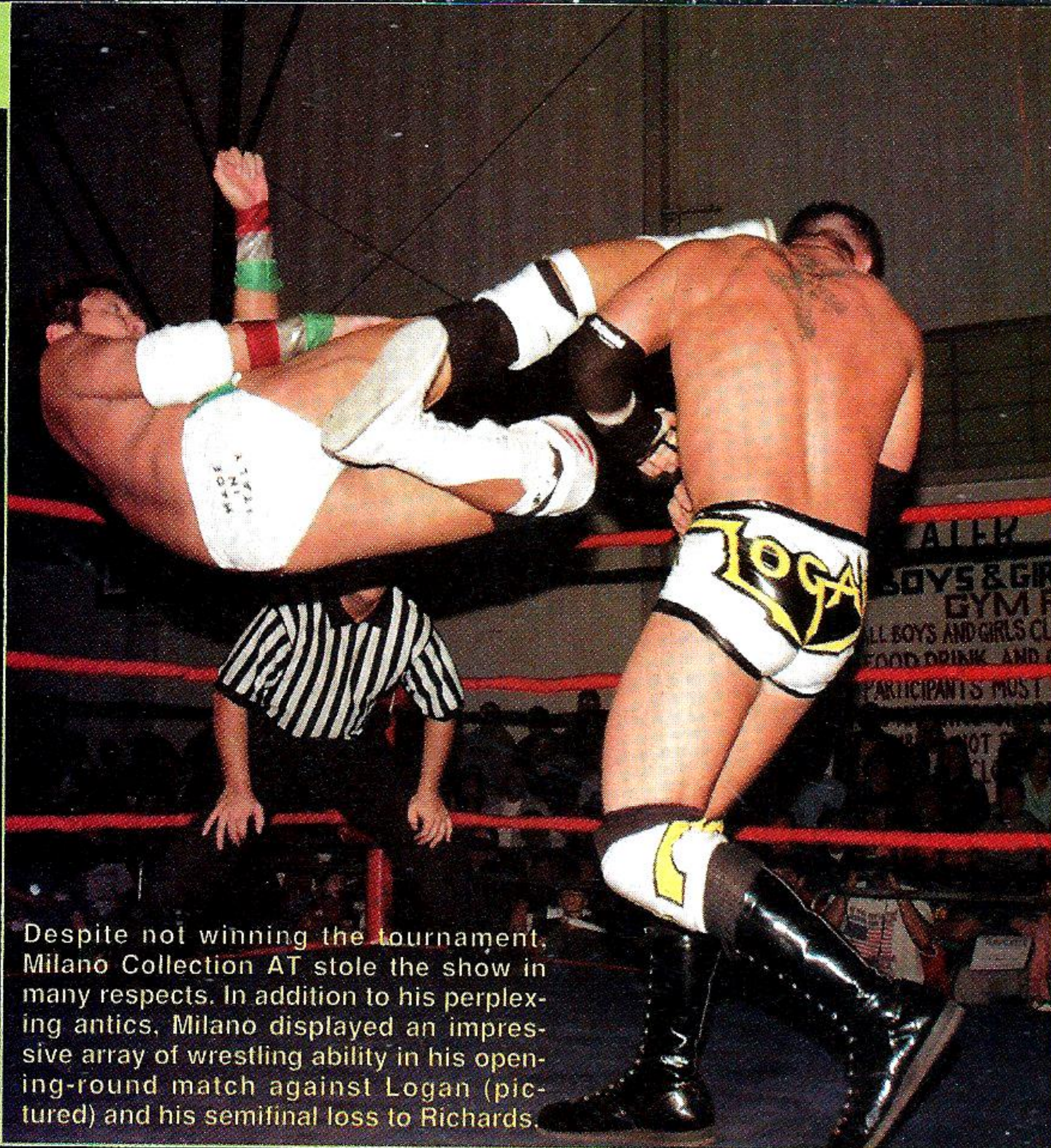
twisting senton and shining wizard before pinning Logan with the IR2, a version of the Styles clash.

With the final four competitors in place, the tone shifted as the tournament advanced to the semifinal round. The competitors took their intensity to a new level as each man realized he was two wins away from being crowned champion.

The first semifinal match saw fan favorite Daniels try to take out Haas' knee as he delivered a vicious surprise dropkick after shaking his opponent's hand. Daniels continued to work over Haas' knee, at one point actually applying the anklelock, to no avail. Hobbled, Haas managed to soften Daniels with an Indian deathlock before applying an anklelock of his own to earn the submission victory.

As the second semifinal match began, it was apparent that Milano was paying attention to Richards' opener against Lost, as he immediately began to exploit his opponent's sore ribs. Milano, however, was slow to press his advantage as he was easily distracted by the fans' taunts. Richards changed the tide by tripping Milano, draping him from the apron in a front chancery, and then dropping him in a DDT to the floor while Milano's lower body was still in the ring. Richards missed a superkick, but he connected with an enzuigiri, allowing him to hit the tiger driver for the pin.

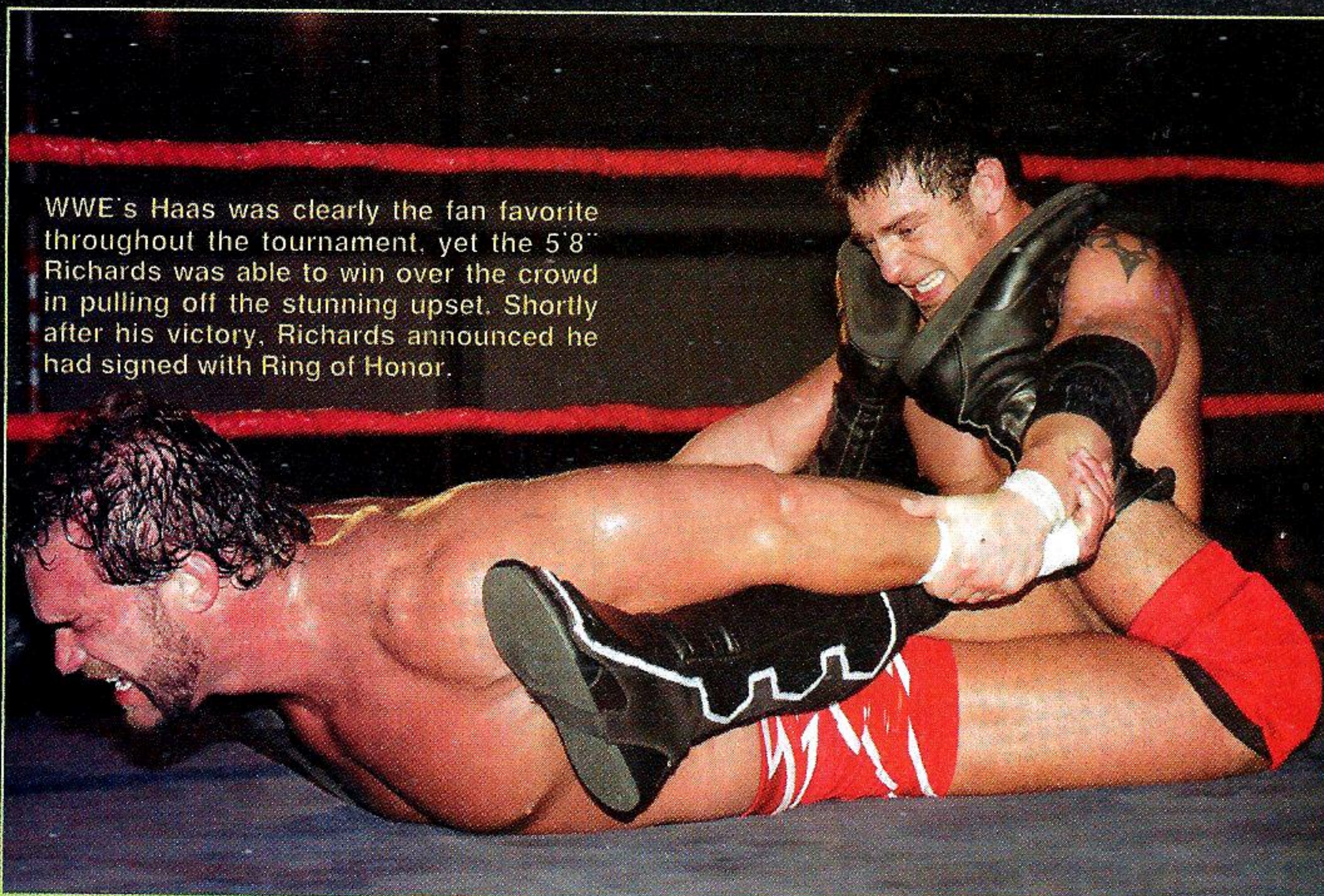
The finals saw a battle of the walking wounded; Richards favored his ribs and Haas limped badly. A back-and-forth contest saw both men landing high-impact maneuvers and feeding off the intensity of the fans. Haas, the tournament favorite, rallied in response to the vocal fans and caught Richards in the Haas of Pain. After almost a minute of fighting the move, Richards managed to turn his hips and sit through, putting Haas



Despite not winning the tournament, Milano Collection AT stole the show in many respects. In addition to his perplexing antics, Milano displayed an impressive array of wrestling ability in his opening-round match against Logan (pictured) and his semifinal loss to Richards.

on his back for a two-count. A surprised Haas relinquished the hold momentarily, which allowed for Richards to snag him in an inside cradle and score the pinfall.

In a display of sportsmanship and respect, Haas hugged Richards as the ring filled with the other tournament participants and past winners, adding another historic chapter to the Super 8 story. □



WWE's Haas was clearly the fan favorite throughout the tournament, yet the 5'8" Richards was able to win over the crowd in pulling off the stunning upset. Shortly after his victory, Richards announced he had signed with Ring of Honor.

the business page

By Harry Burkett

WWE-1, TNA-0 ... For the first time since TNA's inception in 2002, the upstart promotion had the opportunity to face WWE in a one-on-one ratings showdown. But it didn't turn out exactly the way TNA management had long envisioned. On the very fitting date of April 1, WWE challenged TNA in its Saturday night, 11 p.m. Eastern time slot. WWE aired its Hall of Fame ceremonies on the USA Network while TNA's *Impact* was broadcast on Spike TV.

The result? The Hall of Fame

WWE won the first head-to-head ratings battle with TNA in decisive fashion. Its Hall of Fame ceremony inducting Bret Hart and the late Eddie Guerrero (Chris Benoit, Chavo Guerrero, and Rey Mysterio Jr. share the honor) scored a 1.8 rating in the 11 p.m. Saturday night time slot.

drew three times as many viewers, scoring a 1.8, while *Impact* was whopped down to a 0.6.

Competing against the late Eddie Guerrero's induction into the Hall of Fame and Bret Hart's first WWE appearance in eight years, *Impact* probably didn't have a chance. Nevertheless, TNA put together a star-studded edition of *Impact* and, in a controversial decision, produced a WWE-style program, with only seven minutes of wrestling action during the hour. Viewers were treated to Abyss stalking Christian Cage at his home, and tossing the NWA champion into his swimming pool. TNA didn't try to differentiate itself from WWE—although Sting facing down Jeff Jarrett, Scott Steiner, and America's Most

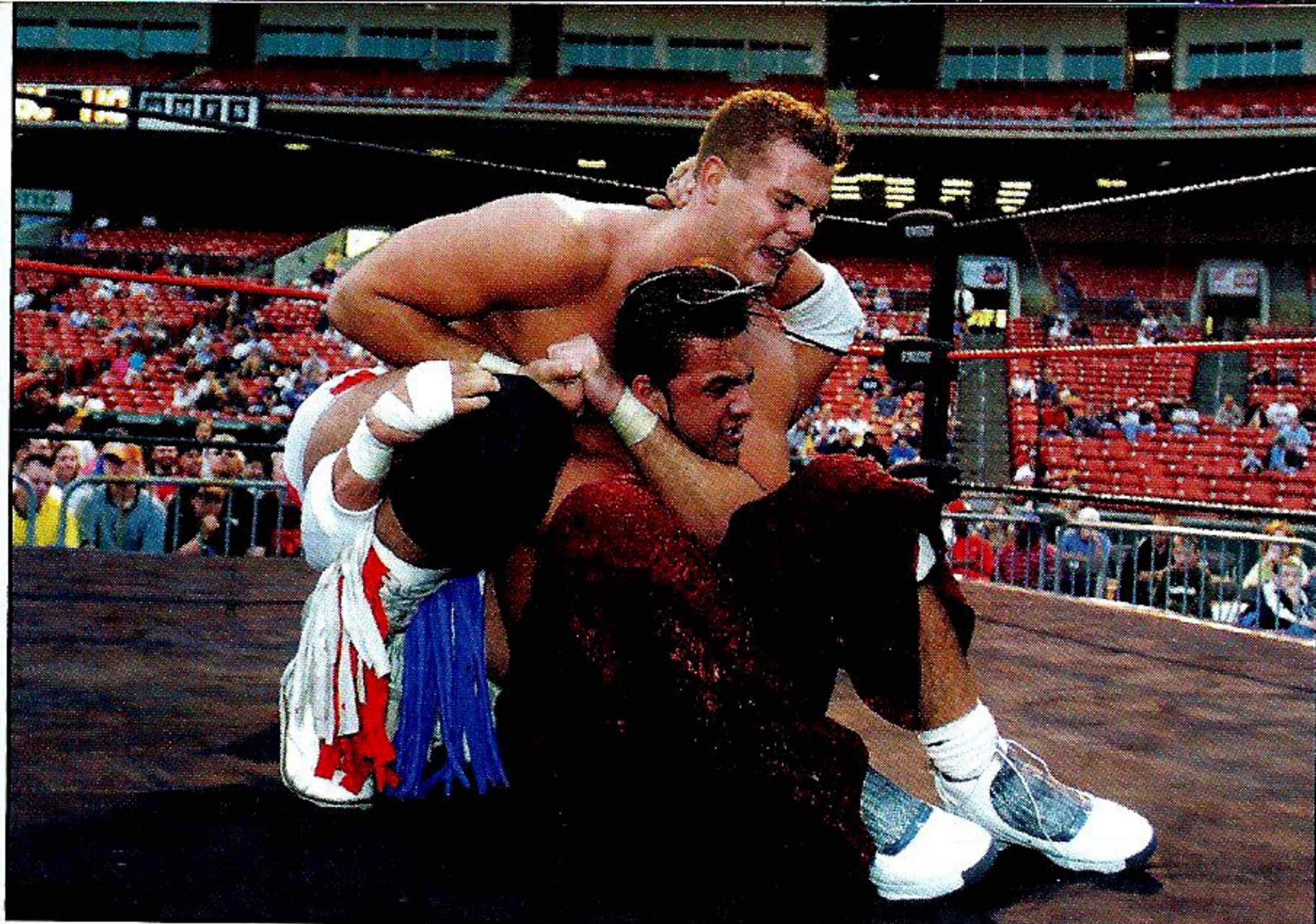
Wanted, among others, served as a strong final segment.

Impact made a big comeback the following week, scoring a 1.0 only five days before its move to the Thursday night, 11 p.m. time slot on Spike TV. Sting made a special appearance, targeting Jarrett's army for destruction at Lockdown. The 1.0 rating was second only to the January 28 edition of *Impact*, which featured "The Stinger's" first live appearance on the program and scored a 1.1.

Ellering loses precious time in Iditarod ... When the legendary Legion of Doom appeared on wrestling broadcasts during their heyday, it was assumed that "Precious" Paul Ellering was merely the brains behind The Road Warriors' brawn. But, in his life after wrestling, former manager "Precious" Paul Ellering is proving that he might have been tougher than Animal or Hawk. During a lonely stretch of the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, Ellering—a sledding veteran—refused to let a serious eye injury knock him out of the competition.

It happened simply enough, when Ellering dozed off while sledding along the barren landscape be-





Harry Smith (with a rear chinlock on cousin Teddy Hart), son of the late Davey Boy Smith and nephew of the Hart family, has signed a contract with WWE. The 20-year-old had been working on the Canadian independent circuit, primarily Calgary's Stampede Wrestling, prior to inking the deal.

tween Ophir and Cripple, Alaska. With the temperature a frigid 50 degrees below zero, he awoke to discover that his eye was frozen and without sight. "The aftereffects you feel," Ellering told the *Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune*. "It just wept and wept and wept. At first, I didn't bandage it, and the pain was excruciating. I had to keep my mitt up over one eye."

When Ellering finally arrived at the Cripple checkpoint, he couldn't find a physician, but a veterinarian was available to treat him. The veterinarian said there was a large white spot in the middle of his eye, and the rest was clouded over.

Ellering was aware that the same condition had sidelined a four-time Iditarod champion a couple of years earlier. The vet's first challenge was using a tiny plunger to remove a hard contact lens out of his eye. Although Ellering didn't win the race, he did reach the finish line. For him, that was a personal victory.

A "Delta Dawn" in USA-Nashville ...

Fans were already excited to watch some famous wrestlers at the Tennessee State Fairgrounds in Nashville, but didn't expect to see an even bigger celebrity. Country music great Tanya Tucker was among those in attendance for the USA-Nashville Wrestling event, which

featured stars such as NWA tag team champions America's Most Wanted, The Naturals, Rick Morton, and Tracey Smothers.

Tucker sat with her daughter, Pressley, in the second row. During an interview with promoter Bert Pren-

tice, Tucker noted that her favorites were The Naturals, who faced local heels The Bullies on the show. She also plugged her upcoming show, *Tuckerville*, which was set to premiere on TLC.

According to reports, Tucker was very accommodating and mingled with fans at the event.

Comings and goings ... Here's a report from WWE as this issue of *PWI* goes to press. Tyson Tomko, Christian Cage's former bodyguard, and WWE have mutually agreed to terms of a release. Tomko, who spent a couple of years in Ohio Valley prior to his call-up to WWE, is planning to accept some dates in Japan.

Meanwhile, Harry Smith—the son of the late Davey Boy Smith and nephew of Bret Hart, has signed with the company. Smith will most likely train in Ohio Valley or Deep South before he joins either the Raw or Smackdown rosters.

WWE Stockwatch

(For the period of February 1 to March 31, 2006)

60-Day High: 17.08 on March 16

60-Day Low: 14.22 on February 17

52-Week High: 17.08 on March 16, 2006

52-Week Low: 9.91 on May 4, 2005

There weren't any hard numbers available concerning WrestleMania 22's buy rate at press time, although its overall take is assumed to be similar to the record-breaking revenue generated by WrestleMania 21. It has already been confirmed, however, that Allstate Arena in Chicago—the home of 'Mania 22—grossed \$2.5-million in sales, making the WWE extravaganza the highest-grossing one-day event in the arena's history. Approximately 17,155 people from 16 countries and 43 states attended the show. The pay-per-view was seen in 90 countries.

Perhaps spurred by the buildup to WrestleMania, WWE's stock continues to make a great recovery, reaching 17.08 on March 16. That is the highest plateau the stock has reached since the 9/11 attacks. Likewise, the report for WWE's third quarter, ending January 27 and released on March 2, revealed that gross revenues increased by a remarkable 67 percent since the same three-month period in 2005. Net profits increased by 25 percent.

Overall, television ratings, pay-per-view buy rates, home-video sales, and merchandise sales are rising. WWE business is nowhere near its 2000 peak, but the landscape is right for improved business over the long term.

TV breakdown

RAW (USA)

February 16: 3.3
February 20: 4.0
February 27: 4.0
March 6: 4.0
March 13: 4.2
March 20: 4.3
March 27: 4.3
April 3: 4.1

Analysis: On February 13, *Raw* went to the dogs—literally! For the first time in five years, the live broadcast aired exclusively on Canada's TSN, as the USA Network aired The Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. But, not to worry, American fans were able to watch the program three nights later on Thursday. On that edition, the road to WrestleMania began in earnest, with Vince McMahon ordering Shawn Michaels to sign his own release and retire and special referee Mick Foley costing Edge the WWE title in a match against champion John Cena. Beginning on February 20, *Raw* hit a comfortable stride, scoring a minimum overall rating of 4.0 every week through WrestleMania 22. Typically, the *Raw* broadcast immediately following WrestleMania is among the highest-scoring of the year, but, unfortunately for WWE, it went against the NCAA basketball finals on CBS. That night, Triple-H and Edge beat WWE champ John Cena in a non-title three-way bout. Although *Raw's* rating of 4.1 was disappointing, considering the WrestleMania lead-in, the program's numbers during the first quarter of 2006 are about a half-point higher than the final quarter of 2005.

SMACKDOWN (UPN)

February 10: 3.0
February 17: 2.8
February 24: 3.0
March 3: 2.6
March 10: 2.6
March 17: 2.6
March 24: 2.8
March 31: 2.7

Analysis: No matter what the *Smackdown* creative team tries, the program can't seem to break through the 3.0-barrier. Overall, the show's average rating has risen by approximately two-tenths of a point since late-2005, but, thanks to its Friday night death-slot, will never gain the kind of momentum *Raw* is experiencing. *Smackdown* has scored an overall rating of 3.0 only twice since January 13. The February 10 broadcast—at which M-N-M and Kurt Angle got involved in The Undertaker's match against Mark Henry and Rey Misterio Jr. got the better of Randy Orton in an out-of-the-ring scuffle—managed to reach 3.0. Two weeks later, the February 24 program—headlined by Rey Misterio Jr., Chris Benoit, and Bobby Lashley defeating Randy Orton, John Bradshaw Layfield, and Fit Finlay—also reached the elusive 3.0 rating. As it seemed, *Smackdown* might gain some traction, it actually hit the doldrums instead, scoring only 2.6 for three consecutive weeks leading into WrestleMania 22. While *Smackdown* boasts solid wrestlers and has straightforward storylines, it lacks the unpredictability of *Raw*. Unfortunately, a McMahon may have to assume an on-air presence to provide that.

IMPACT (Spike TV)

February 11: 0.8
February 18: 0.7
February 25: 0.9
March 4: 0.7
March 11: 0.7
March 18: 0.9
March 25: 0.9
April 1: 0.6
April 8: 1.0

Analysis: Here's the bad news first: TNA lost its first head-to-head showdown with WWE, with WWE's Hall of Fame ceremonies beating *Impact* in the ratings. The good news is that *Impact* rebounded to a 1.0 the following week. And, vindicating the philosophy of Dixie Carter and Jeff Jarrett, and no doubt confounding nearly every critic on the Internet, programs that are top-heavy with established talent are doing better in the ratings. Like the January 28 program featuring Sting's only live *Impact* appearance, which scored a 1.1, the March 18 show leading into Destination X was built around Sting's role in the pay-per-view. The March 25 edition, immediately following the PPV, was also built around Sting and the arrival of Scott Steiner, who delivered a promo in the opening segment. Carter, Jarrett, and the booking committee are hoping viewers will tune in to see recognizable stars initially, but the in-ring talent of Samoa Joe, Christopher Daniels, A.J. Styles, and others will make them long-term fans. On April 8, the final edition of *Impact* in the Saturday night time slot scored an impressive 1.0. The hope was that *Impact* could continue that trend in its new Thursday night, 11 p.m. Eastern time slot.

the trade's mark

By Frank Ingiosi

AM YOU.

You, the fan reading this column, are sitting where I was a mere six months ago. Actually, maybe not. See, I've always been a "closet" wrestling fan. Once adolescence passed and Friday nights were filled less with little league games and more with the stumbling insecurity that was high school dating, being an acknowledged wres-

tling fan was akin to having a social disease. The only guys in high school that openly followed wrestling were those who sort of kept to themselves and looked as if they heard entrance music playing in their head everywhere they walked.

However, with college came new hope for the wrestling fan. Not only was college life a new world of experiences and life changes, but it was

also provided a venue where it was okay to be "different." I was fortunate enough to be at the perfect age to enjoy the Monday Night War, which was in full swing by my freshman year. I was able to live through the "sports entertainment Renaissance." Degeneration X T-shirts were just as prevalent around campus as anything by Abercrombie & Fitch. Wrestling fans soon seemed to outnumber those who weren't following the sport. For the first time since puberty, it was cool again to be a wrestling fan.

As the on-screen NWO grew to include seem-

ingly every wrestler who had ever laced up a pair of boots, so did the fan base. And so there we were—hundreds of teenagers, both men and women (okay, not so many women) standing around professing our allegiance to a sport that was once considered social suicide to follow. However, the love-fest was short-lived. As went the War, so did the acceptance. It was almost as if life was imitating art.

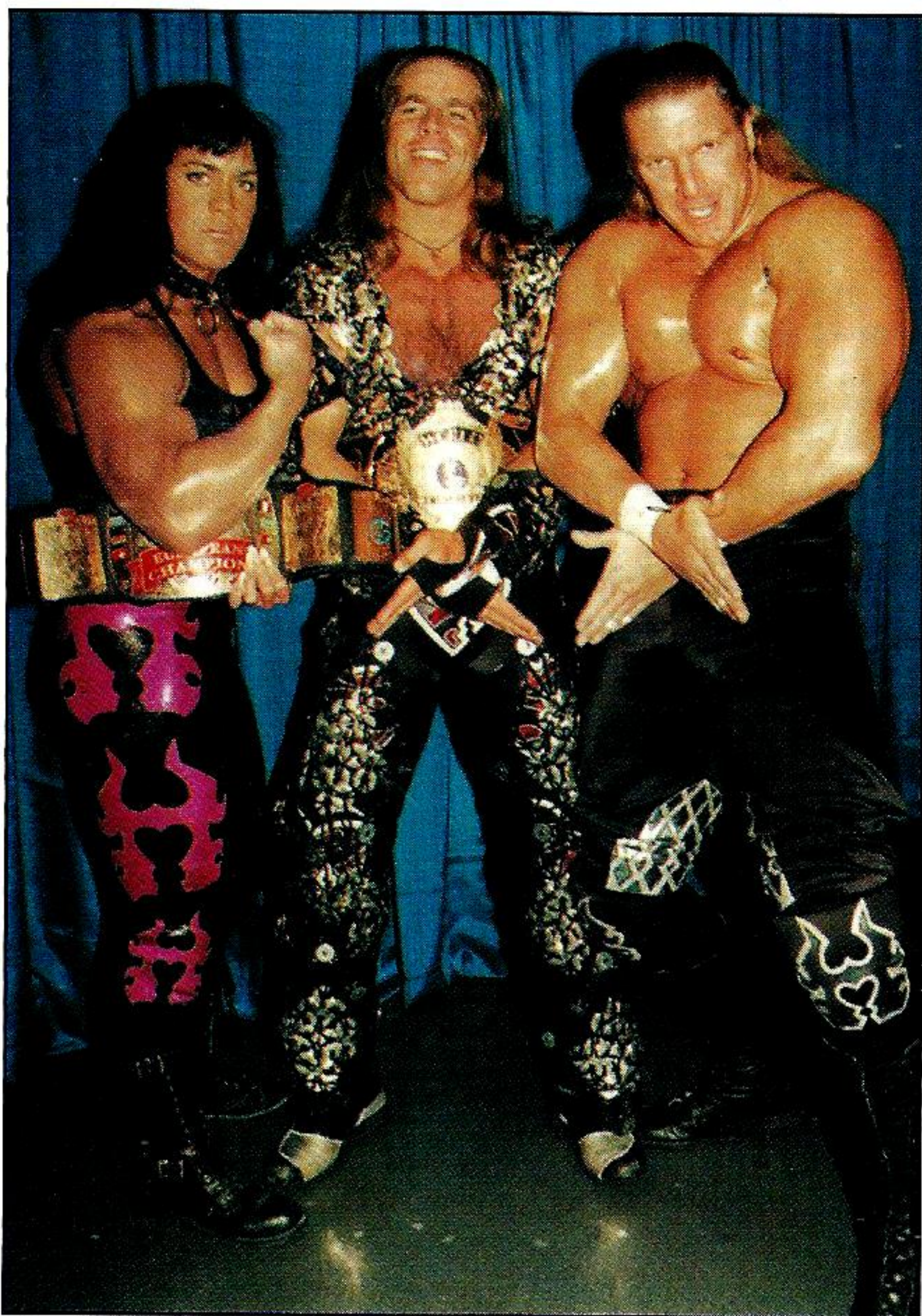
As meteoric a rise the wrestling industry experienced in the late 1990s, its fall was just as historic. By my senior year in college—five years after Hulk Hogan went "Hollywood"—WCW was dead, Vinnie Mac owned the world, and wrestling fans everywhere were forced back into seclusion.

It was high school all over again.

People who just a year before were showing up at Halloween parties dressed as Billy Gunn (I've seen it myself ... disturbing, really) were now disavowing any allegiance to the sport. It just wasn't "cool" anymore to be a wrestling fan. And, I must admit, I was one of those automatons. As college was drawing to a close and the industry was becoming consolidated under one flag flying high above Stamford, Connecticut, it seemed like a natural time to end my days as a wrestling fan and focus on becoming a productive and relatively well-balanced member of society.

It was during my final semester of college that I applied to law school on a whim. The morning after my 22nd birthday, I groggily rolled out of bed, scoured the living room (which still reeked of stale beer and a delightful mélange of B.O.) for leftovers from the party the night before. Somewhere between sipping a melted Jell-O shot and feeding a pizza crust to our pet alligator, I made a decision that would change my life.

Tiptoeing past my hibernating roommates, I made my way to the computer and filled out an application for law school. Two hours later, I finished my packet, tossed it in the mail, and forgot about it. One week



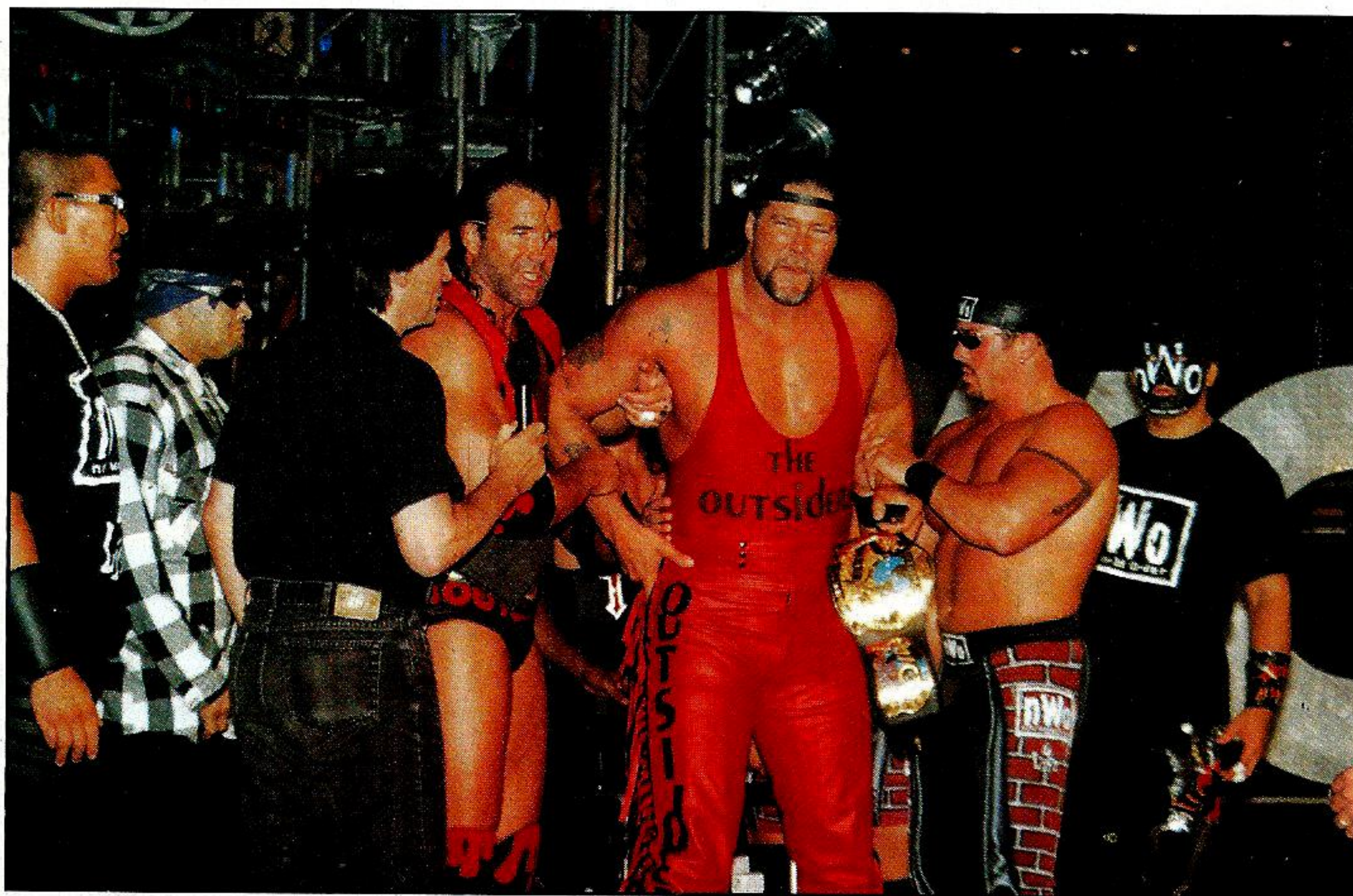
Ahh, the late-1990s. Triple-H was hated for all the right reasons, Chyna was the second "most buff" member of DX, and crotch-chopping your friends "hello" was as common as a handshake. The "Monday Night War" era was a great time to be a wrestling fan, recalls Frank Ingiosi.

before commencement ceremonies, I was informed that I would be part of the graduating class of 2005. I was going to be a lawyer.

Entirely unprepared, I headed off into a field of which I knew little more than what television had taught me. I knew people who had gone to law school, but, to me at least, they seemed exactly like the type of person you'd expect to become lawyers. They were argumentative, relatively egomaniacal, and had an air about them as if they all knew something that the rest of us didn't (today, we call them "McMahons"). I was never like that. My goal was as innocent and naïve as most 1Ls (the term for first year law students): to get an education and use my newfound powers for good and not evil. However, in the back of my mind, I knew that I'd sue my own grandmother if the money was right.

I quickly learned that while *saying* you were in law school was money-in-the-bank with the women, actually *succeeding* in the endeavor would be far more difficult. I always did well in school, although something seemed a bit off. While my fellow jackals were all gravitating toward areas of law that suited their distinct personalities, I jumped from discipline to discipline. I enjoyed many areas of the law, yet no single aspect really stuck with me to the point where I figured "this is it ... this will be my life."

All along, while I searched for some area of which I could dedicate myself, my waning appreciation for wrestling was pushed even further to the back of my consciousness. There's barely enough time in a law student's personal life to devote to friends or family, let alone a few hours a week to watch wrestling. And then, one of my friends slipped. He mentioned how he was going to take the evening off from his studies to watch *Raw*. His revelation was met with silence.



The basic premise behind a successful faction is that it must have others who aren't in said group with whom to feud. That wasn't the case with the NWO. As the "Monday Night War" died, so did the mainstream acceptance of wrestling, forcing fans like Ingiosi back into hiding.

He quickly caught himself as he realized he was in mixed company. See, none of us had ever mentioned wrestling and, looking back, I suppose this was his way of testing the waters. Squirming uneasily in his seat, it was as if he had revealed a deep, dark secret of his past: He was a wrestling fan. Sure, we all were at sometime in our lives, yet whether by choice or lack of conviction, we had buried that portion of ourselves deep in the past. Sensing my buddy's growing discomfort, I gave him an approving nod—the highest form of male communication—as if to say, "It's all right, man. I dig it, too."

We were like spies communicating the dorkiest of secret languages. However, I didn't care anymore. At that moment, in the basement of the law library during our study group meeting, I realized I was still a wrestling fan—and that was okay. Getting back into wrestling soon became a welcomed distraction to the insanity that was legal training.

After I finished law school, I began the excruciating process of looking for gainful employment. Mind you, I did not go to Harvard. No, my school was located within walking distance

of a mega-mall and a TGI Fridays, which boded well for my pending legal career.

It was during this search that I came across an esoteric ad looking for someone to "edit a wrestling magazine." Summoning my best "why the hell not" attitude, I submitted an application. It was probably one of the 20 or so resumes I submitted on any given day. A week later I received an e-mail from our publisher, Stu Saks, inquiring as to why someone with a *juris doctorate* would want to work for a wrestling magazine. My response was simple and direct: "I'm a big believer in doing what you love, and this seems like just that opportunity."

So here I am—the wrestling fan who stumbled into the opportunity of a lifetime. I promise you, my fellow fans, that my 1,200 words will be for us. I'm just the average guy who took the strangest path possible to become the mouthpiece of the fan. I'm the "trade's mark." □

(Questions, comments, concerns you'd like Frank to address? Send it all to pwi_ingiosi@yahoo.com. Also, visit www.pwi-online.com for Frank's "Tuesday Morning Turn," posted the morning after each Raw.)

win, lose, or draw

By Harry Burkett

THE SIGHT OF Bret Hart smiling at a WWE podium would have probably sickened me five years ago. With thoughts of the Survivor Series double-cross and Owen Hart's death fresh on everyone's minds, it would have seemed wildly inappropriate for Bret to participate in any WWE event. I would have called him a sellout. It would have seemed that placating Vince McMahon was more important than his own late brother.

Like so many fans, I became emotionally entangled with the Hart family's woes in the late-'90s. I could put myself in Bret's place and imagine what it would be like to have my employer screw me over. I could imagine what it was like to have a little brother die in a freak accident. Bret must have had many second thoughts: If he had better communication with Vince prior to his WWF title defense in Montreal, could he have avoided the double-cross? If he had ignored WCW's big bucks and remained with the WWF in the first place, wouldn't Owen still be alive?

That is the connection Bret Hart made with the fans. We were sorry that a decent man had to endure such traumatic events. We were angry, too, with Vince McMahon for screwing Bret in favor of Shawn Michaels and allowing Owen to be in the rafters on that fateful night in Kansas City. For many of us, our bitterness was a show of support for the "Hitman." All of those "You screwed Bret" chants that still resonate in Montreal are proof of that. If Hart had forgiven McMahon

before we were ready, it would have been a grave disappointment.

The 2006 WWE Hall of Fame ceremony proved the axiom is true: Time heals all wounds. It doesn't mean that all of that bitterness wasn't justified, and it doesn't mean that anyone is getting away with anything. It's like serving jail time. Once the sentence is over, it's time to move on with life. Bret has suffered enough, and Vince has been criticized enough. Bret Hart deserves to be a WWE Hall of Famer, enjoying the benefits of his

legendary status without being ground into the mat every night. If Hart had rejected the induction offer, he would have cheated himself ... and deprived his fans and fellow wrestlers of the opportunity to thank him for his two decades in the business.

Hart's appearance at a WWE event for the first time in eight years was a dramatic moment. I enjoyed watching him shake hands with Steve Austin, whose career Bret helped launch at WrestleMania XIII, and it seemed appropriate that Hulk Hogan, the McMahon family, and a new generation of WWE superstars were in attendance to honor him. Before addressing the crowd, Bret let out a casual smile. He was home again.

The former WWF and WCW champion described the situation perfectly when he said, "I will never forget what WWE took away from me, but I will never forget what it gave me." Appropriately, Bret mentioned Owen in his acceptance



Making his first WWE appearance in eight years, Bret Hart proved that, as in life, time heals all wounds in professional wrestling. The "Hitman" took his time to make peace with WWE, and Harry Burkett feels his legacy is now complete.

speech, and he pointed to his Intercontinental title defense against Davey Boy Smith at London's Wembley Stadium as the highlight of his career. Hart gave the sense that he was at peace with himself and the world. I believe it.

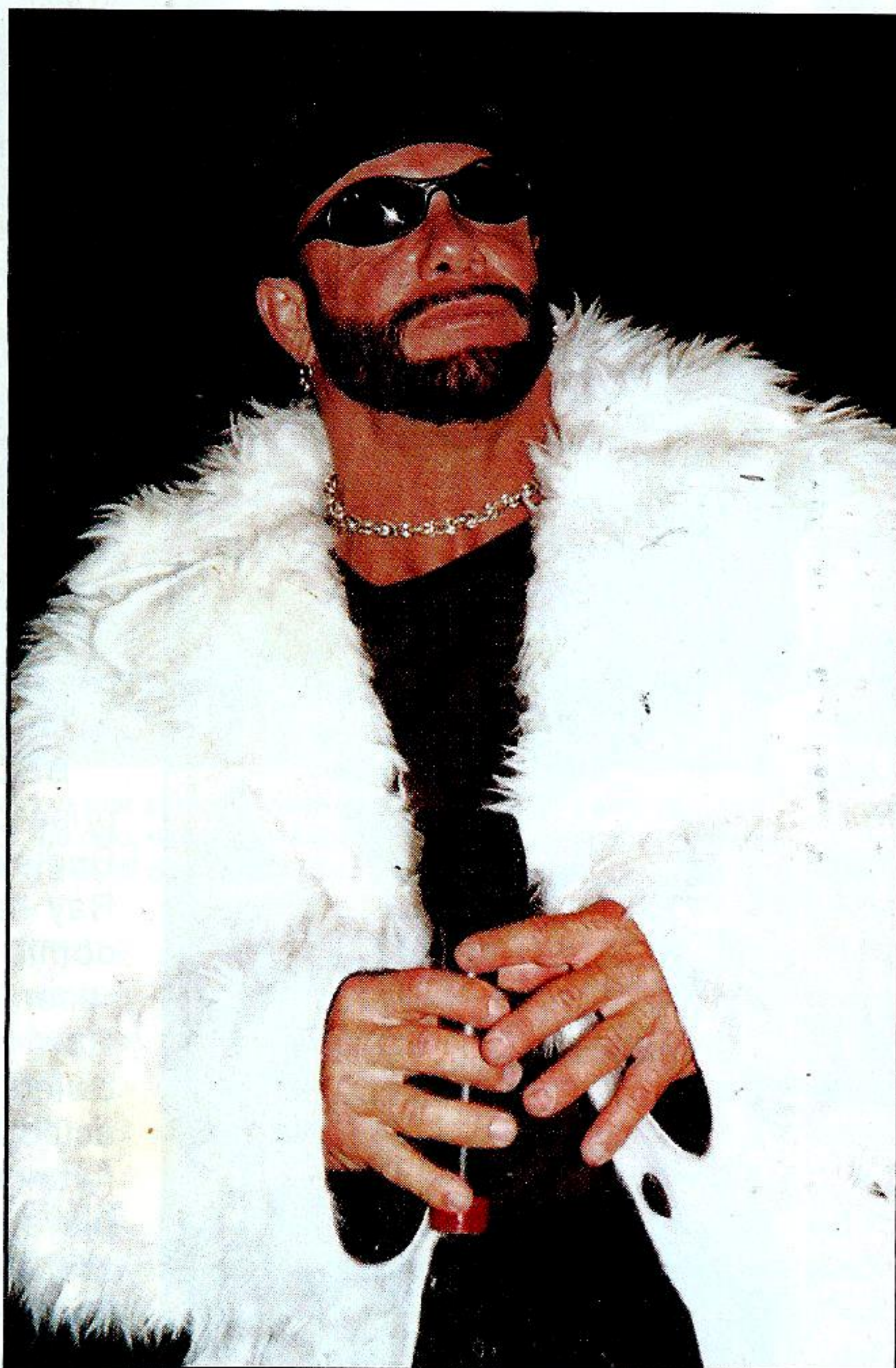
There may be a small number of people who think Bret sold out. After all, there are other halls of fame: the Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame in New York; the International Wrestling Institute & Museum in Iowa; and the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame, which we recognize here at *PWI*. If Hart wants to be recognized for his achievements, those institutions have far more credibility than the WWE Hall of Fame. After all, none of them include Pete Rose, William "The Refrigerator" Perry, or McMahon family friend and driver James Dudley.

Clearly, the WWE Hall of Fame is a bonus for good behavior—and those wrestlers who have had a falling-out with the McMahons don't have a chance for induction. While I applaud the McMahons' willingness to allow non-WWE wrestlers—including men like Verne Gagne—into the Hall, I would never expect it to be a true representation of excellence in the business. Bob Orton Jr. is already a member, but Lou Thesz is not. Hillbilly Jim is a member, but Danny Hodge is not. Why do I get the feeling that Moondog Rex will be a member before Bruno Sammartino?

Yet there's a reason why the WWE Hall of Fame is so important. Hall of fame ceremonies are all about recognition. With WWE's wide media reach, including a one-hour special devoted to the event each year, its Hall of Fame does more to spotlight deserving

wrestlers than any privately funded museum or insider newsletter. That's like being awarded a certificate and hiding it in a drawer. Bret Hart deserved to be honored with cameras rolling and millions watching around the world.

Vince McMahon has had very strained relationships with his former employees. Hulk Hogan resisted a comeback in WWE for a full year after WCW's demise. On *Don-*



The time has come for other legends—such as the volatile and enigmatic "Macho Man" Randy Savage—to follow Hart's lead, mend fences with WWE, and take their rightful places in its Hall of Fame.

ahue in the early-'90s, Superstar Graham accused McMahon of encouraging steroid use in the WWF. Verne Gagne was among the cadre of promoters determined to knock off "Junior" at the start of the WWF's national expansion. McMahon was willing to overlook all of those issues and admit those men into the Hall of Fame. The

"Hitman" was a model employee for 12 years before his relationship with McMahon went awry at *Survivor Series* 1997.

The inductions of Hogan, Graham, Gagne, and Hart were once considered unthinkable. So, who's left? Four ex-McMahon employees who immediately come to mind are Bruno Sammartino, Bob Backlund, Randy Savage, and The Ultimate Warrior. It has been reported that Backlund declined induction into the Hall of Fame, although no explanation has been given. But, in the cases of Sammartino, Savage, and the Warrior, there are definitely hard feelings. Sooner or later, all three of those men will have to deal with McMahon if they want to salvage their legacies.

Sammartino had some talks with Jim Ross—then a company vice president—in 2004, but "Da Brune" decided that he wasn't ready to return with good conscience. Savage and McMahon are now enemies after being friends for many years. And the Warrior? What can I say? It's as if the heavens divided, lightning bolts rained down upon the earth, and suddenly the mighty phenom known as The Ultimate Warrior was obliterated and decimated from the history of sports entertainment and the cosmos.

None of those men should consider a spot in the WWE Hall of Fame as "dealing with the Devil."

They should view the Hall of Fame in the way it was intended: a way for the industry—and the fans—to thank them for their contributions to professional wrestling.

The WWE Hall of Fame wouldn't have been complete without Bret Hart ... and Bret Hart's career wouldn't have been complete without the WWE Hall of Fame. □

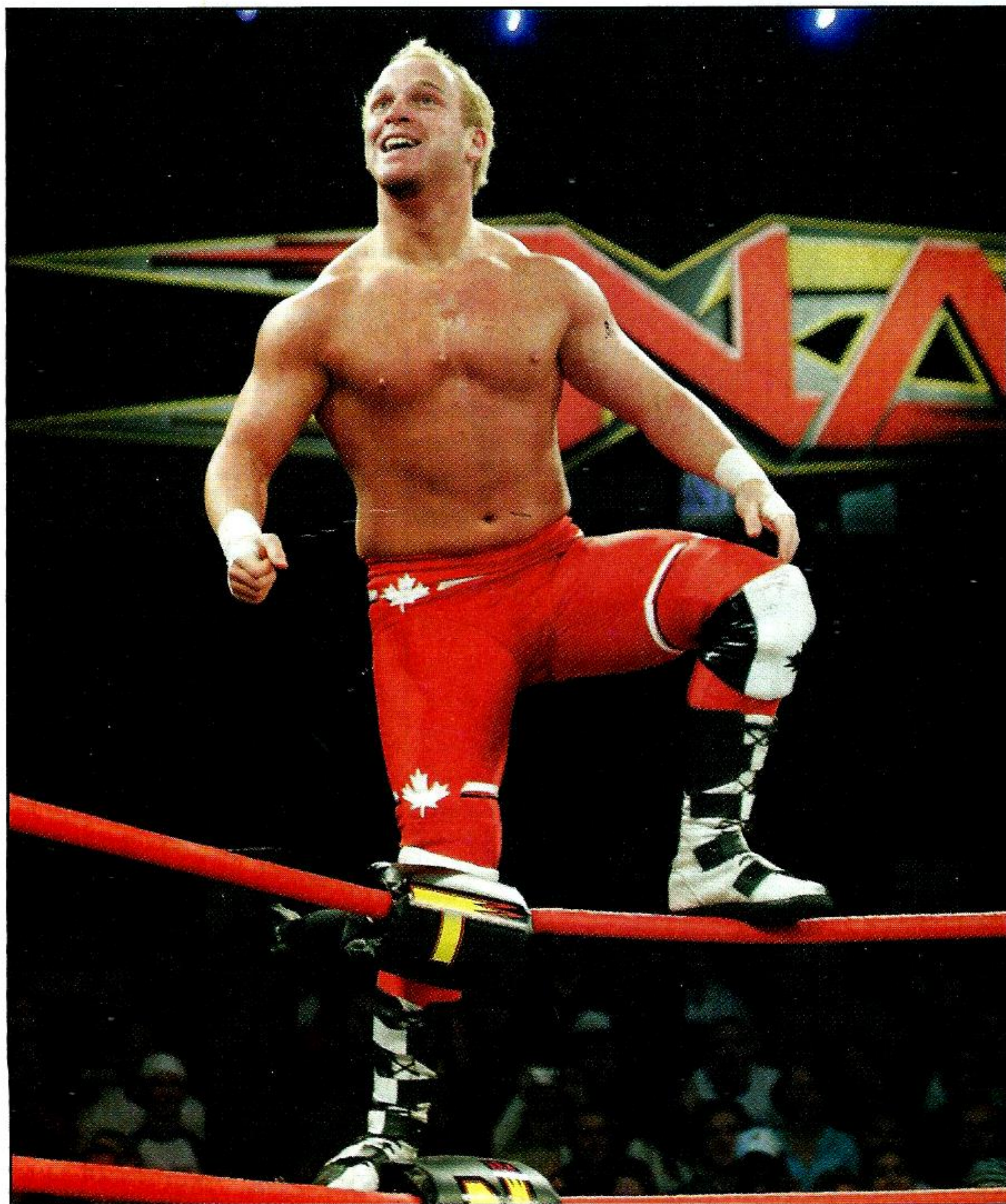
the straight shooter

By Dan Murphy

I ADMIT I have been a TNA critic. I think the "spot-monkey" X division style is good only in small doses. I've found storylines disjointed and lacking in continuity, and at times, it has been far too gimmicky for my liking with two gratuitous sides on the ring,

NASCAR drivers running around willy-nilly, and super-sized Xs hanging on cables that turn "Ultimate X" matches into monkey bar competitions.

That and I could go to the grave happy if I never saw another Jeff Jarrett match.



Eric Young had been one of the primary beneficiaries of Sting's return to TNA, as his paranoia thrust him to the forefront of the premier storyline on *Impact*. Dan Murphy feels that what Young brings to TNA should earn him more face-time on *Impact*.

But over the past few months, TNA has been growing on me. In fact, there are a few guys who I feel are developing into very entertaining characters and guys I tune in to see. Here are five TNA wrestlers I want to see more of:

AUSTIN ARIES: I was impressed with Aries when I first saw him in the 2004 Super 8 Tournament. Now that he has glammed up his look a bit, he reminds me of a younger, more athletic Randy Savage. He has great facial expressions, with an impressive moveset, including the pendulum elbow—a true scene-stealer.

ALEX SHELLEY: Another Super 8 alumnus who re-made himself in TNA. Aside from his impressive in-ring skills, Shelley showed some great humor in his Sting surveillance tapes. I laughed out loud when he ragged on Sting's kids' basketball skills and commented on buying a "pad like Sting's" when he moves out of his apartment. He can be funny without having people write funny lines for him deliver.

BROTHER RAY: This is a surprise because I got tired of The Dudleys a couple of years back. Ray has also been adding some comic flourishes recently. In a recent six-man with Devon and Ron Killings, he accidentally called Killings "Devon," and then acted like he couldn't tell the difference between the two. Yeah, it plays to the ridiculous stereotype that all black people look alike, but Ray's confused delivery and the looks Devon and Killings gave him for the *faux pas* were priceless. Ray can be very funny and entertaining when he's not too tightly scripted, as any old ECW fans will attest.

ERIC YOUNG: I was lucky enough to get to see "Showtime" quite a bit during his early days in Southern Ontario. His goofy, paranoid, Sting-fearing gimmick brings back memories of Rick Steiner back in the Varsity Club days. "Showtime" has always been fun to watch, and he has elevated his game in TNA.



Whereas "The Dudley Boyz" may have lost some of their appeal in WWE, "Team 3D" has been the perfect change of pace for the duo, especially Brother Ray. He has shown flashes of the charisma exhibited in the team's ECW days, and fans have taken notice.

COACH D'AMORE: D'Amore picks up where Jim Cornette as the frazzled manager who's always putting out fires and trying to keep things from falling apart left off. His interviews are always concise, effective, and usually entertaining—in their own way. Anyone who thinks the concept of wrestling managers is *passé* hasn't been watching D'Amore close enough.

And here are five TNA wrestlers I'd like to see less of:

RODERICK STRONG: Isn't being "The Messiah Of The Backbreaker" akin to being the "Sultan Of The Sleeper?" Either way, it's boring. There are only so many ways you can drive your knees into a guy's back. Besides, when's the last time you saw a match end with a backbreaker?

LARRY ZBYSZKO: To quote Homer Simpson, "The only guys

who wear Hawaiian shirts are gay guys and big fat party animals"; Larry must have missed that episode. The self-proclaimed "Living Legend" should not only be a charter member of Mr. Blackwell's "Worst Dressed List," he should also disappear from all TNA storylines. The man's as dull as safety scissors.

AMERICA'S MOST WANTED: I like James Storm as the drunken cowboy, but I still just can't buy AMW as an elite tandem. It takes more than some clotheslines and a guillotine legdrop to be great. Actually, it takes more than that just to be *good*.

KIP JAMES: The only successful gimmick Kip ever had was showing off his rear end, and the only reason that got over was because he was part of Degeneration X. Call him whatever you

want—Billy Gunn, "Mr. Ass," "The One," "No Introduction Needed"—anyway you look at him, he's a big, bland, boring guy.

RHINO: The man-beast is just too one-dimensional. Note to all future opponents: If you find yourself dazed, have a feeling Rhino is somewhere behind you, and you hear hundreds of fans simultaneously yelling "Gore!", you probably want to take a step to your side and let Rhino run himself into the steel corner post. Then pin him. There, now no one has any excuses to lose to Rhino again.

I was preparing my tax forms recently when I made a startling realization. As a freelance writer with London Publishing, I get paid by the word. I had a little too much time on my hands the other day, and I divided the amount of money I made in 2005 by the amount I'm paid per word to figure out how many words I wrote for *PWI* and its sister publications this year. Then I looked up the total amount of money I earned from London Publishing since I started in 1997, and figured out about how many words I've written on pro wrestling to date.

By my calculations, I have now written more than 1 million words on wrestling.

For comparison's sake, I counted the number of words on a random page of Tolstoy's *War And Peace* and multiplied that by the total number of pages (1,455). That means there are about 683,000 words in *War And Peace*.

What does all this mean?

Over the past 10 years, if you put everything I've written for these magazines together in one collection, it would be almost 1½ times longer than the consummate epic modern novel.

What else does it mean?

I am declaring myself the "Leo Tolstoy Of Wrestling Journalists." And I probably need to get a hobby. □

You're at the airport. You see your favorite wrestler relaxing in one of the terminals. You rush up to him or her as questions fill your excited mind. There are certain things you just *have* to know about this person. Well, these are the 12 questions you'd never think of asking

12 questions

ALEX SHELLEY

Seriously ... what's with the hair?

I get that question a lot, so I'll give you the same answer I give everyone else ... "next question."

You're a Detroit-area native. What is your favorite memory of growing up in the murder capital of the U.S.?

See, that's not accurate. It's my understanding that we're at least second or third now. But seriously, I love the area and miss the people I left there. Now that I'm a big star, it's always nice to pop back in and enjoy the fruits of my success. Namely, the women.

I read on the Internet once that Detroit is an Arctic wasteland filled with polar bears and defecting Canadians. Is that true?

Yes, actually. The greater Detroit area is known for its polar bear pelts and tremendous influx of Canadians looking to escape the harshness associated with universal healthcare and fantastic alcohol. You were dropped on your head as a child, weren't you?

What is your favorite part of wrestling on the indy circuit?

Outside of visiting places all around the world and

making the fans squeal, I love being able to shower after a match. You'd think that's a given, but, in some of the places I've been, showers seemed to be reserved for royalty.

What is something that fans do that really annoys you?

You mean besides ask me stupid questions? Once I had a fan come up to me in a bathroom and ask to shake my hand after he had just used the facilities.

Where would you love to continue your career if TNA sent you packing tomorrow?

I've done some work in Japan with Pro Wrestling ZERO1-MAX with the likes of Minoru Fujita and Ikuto Hidaka. I love the atmosphere there, so possibly Japan. But, really, it's not gonna happen. Next dumb question?

I don't get to travel much. Is Japan really as it seems in *The Karate Kid, Part II*?

(Stares blankly) Japan is a wonderful country filled with rich culture and tradition. So, yes, it's exactly like *Karate Kid*. Basically everyone is doing the "crane kick" and chopping through blocks of ice for money.

What's creepier: guys on stilts or people that dress their dogs?

People that dress their dogs should be taken out to the woods, stripped, and left there in humiliation.

Would you please give me your best Dusty Rhodes impression?

(In an awful Southern drawl) Weeeeell, Daddy, I just may have realized how great you were had I taken my head out of my ass for two minutes.

Do you have any other ambitions for your career besides being Jeff Jarrett's personal lackey?

If you took the time to look back at my career, I've been pretty successful thus far, and I see no reason to stop. I've held titles from here to Japan. I truly believe the world has yet to see the greatness that is Alex Shelley.

Where did you learn to be so handy with a video camera?

College ... no further comment.

You have a hammer, midget, and a roulette wheel. What are your plans for the evening?

I'd throw in my video camera and end up with a German art-house-esque film that ends with a crying old man and a silhouette of a rooster. □

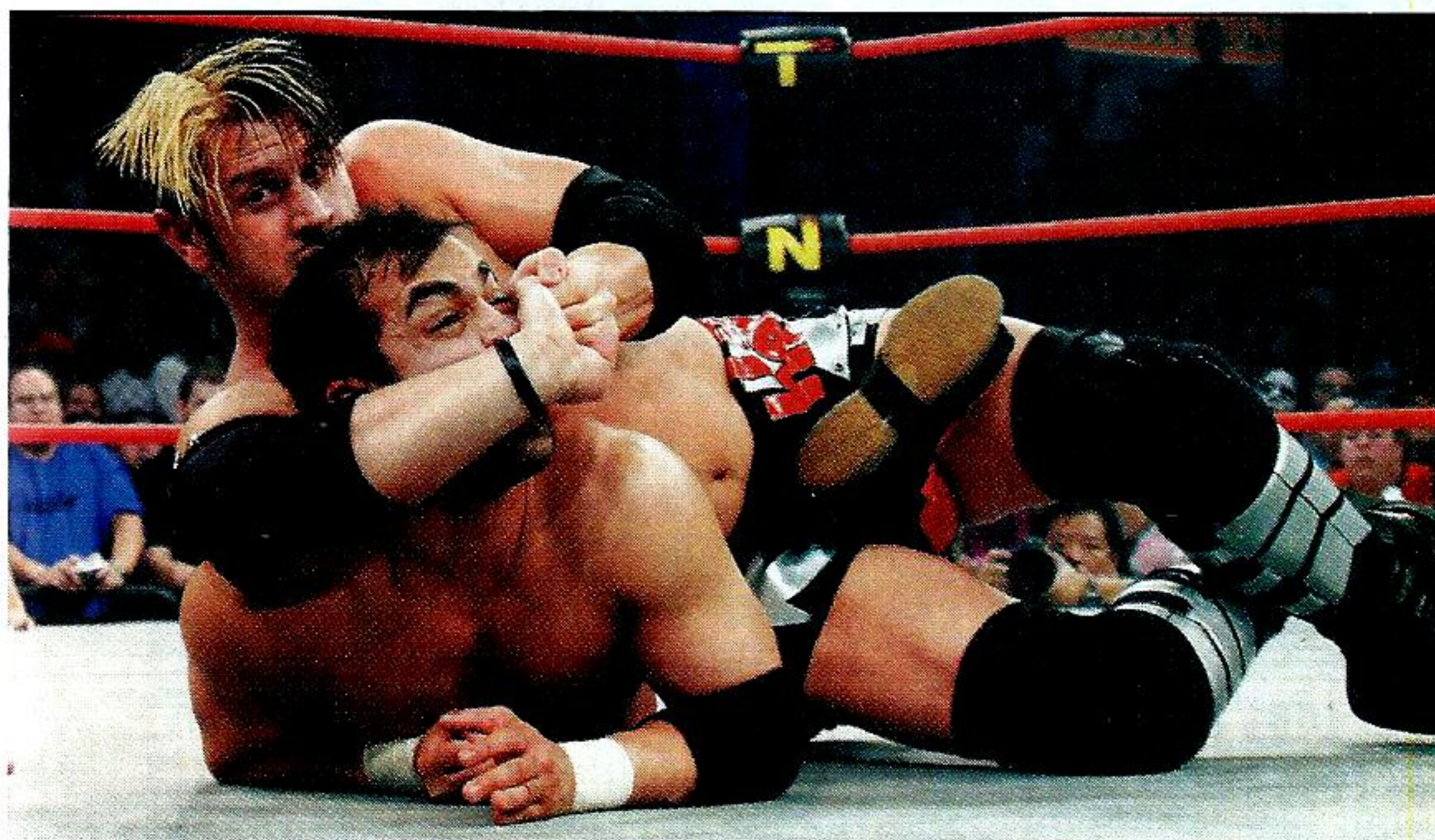
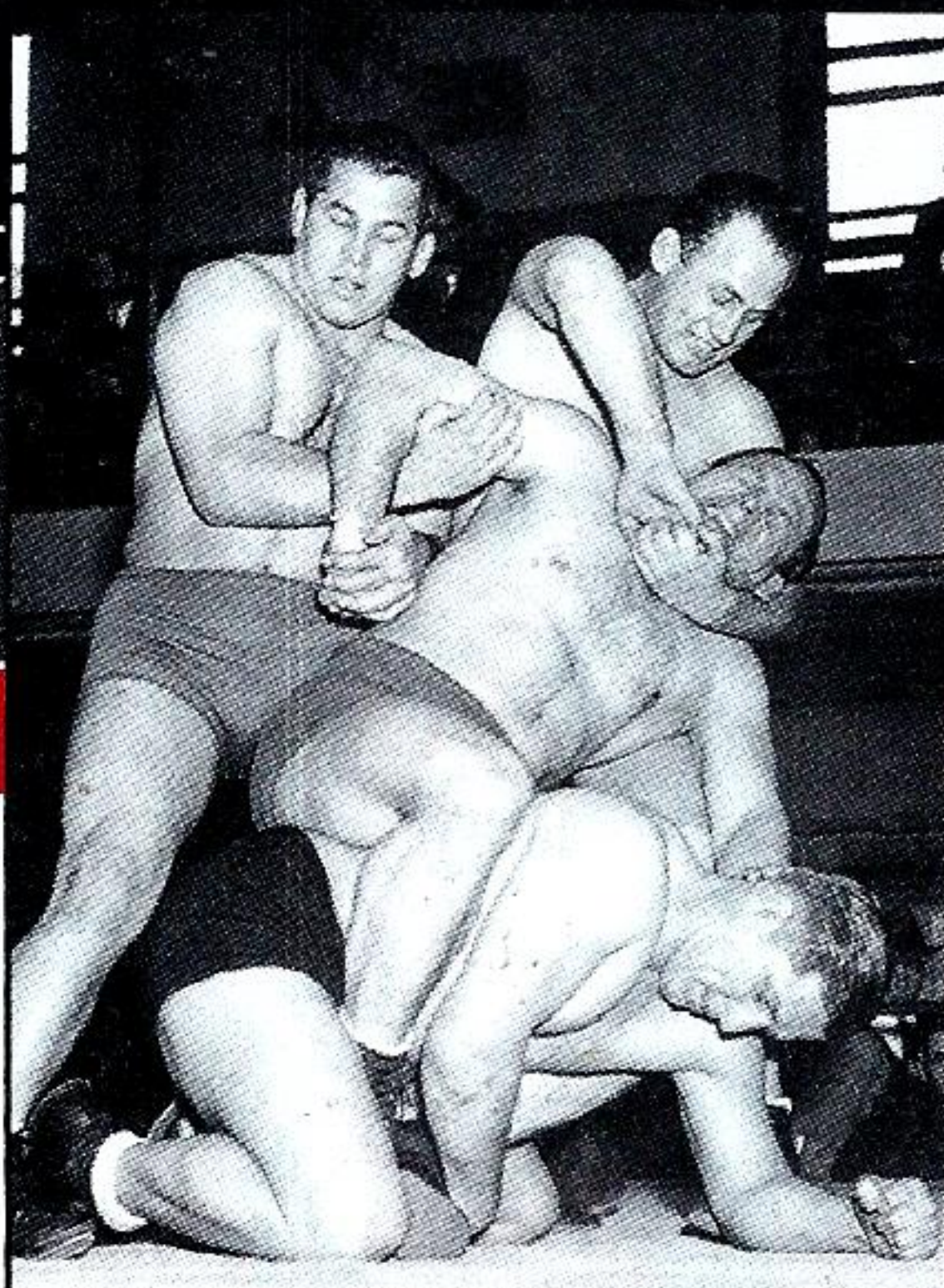


Photo By Lee South/TNA Wrestling





The Dusek Riot Squad

FROM THE 1930s through the 1960s, the Dusek family made an indelible mark on the wrestling world, from wrestling for world championships to popularizing tag

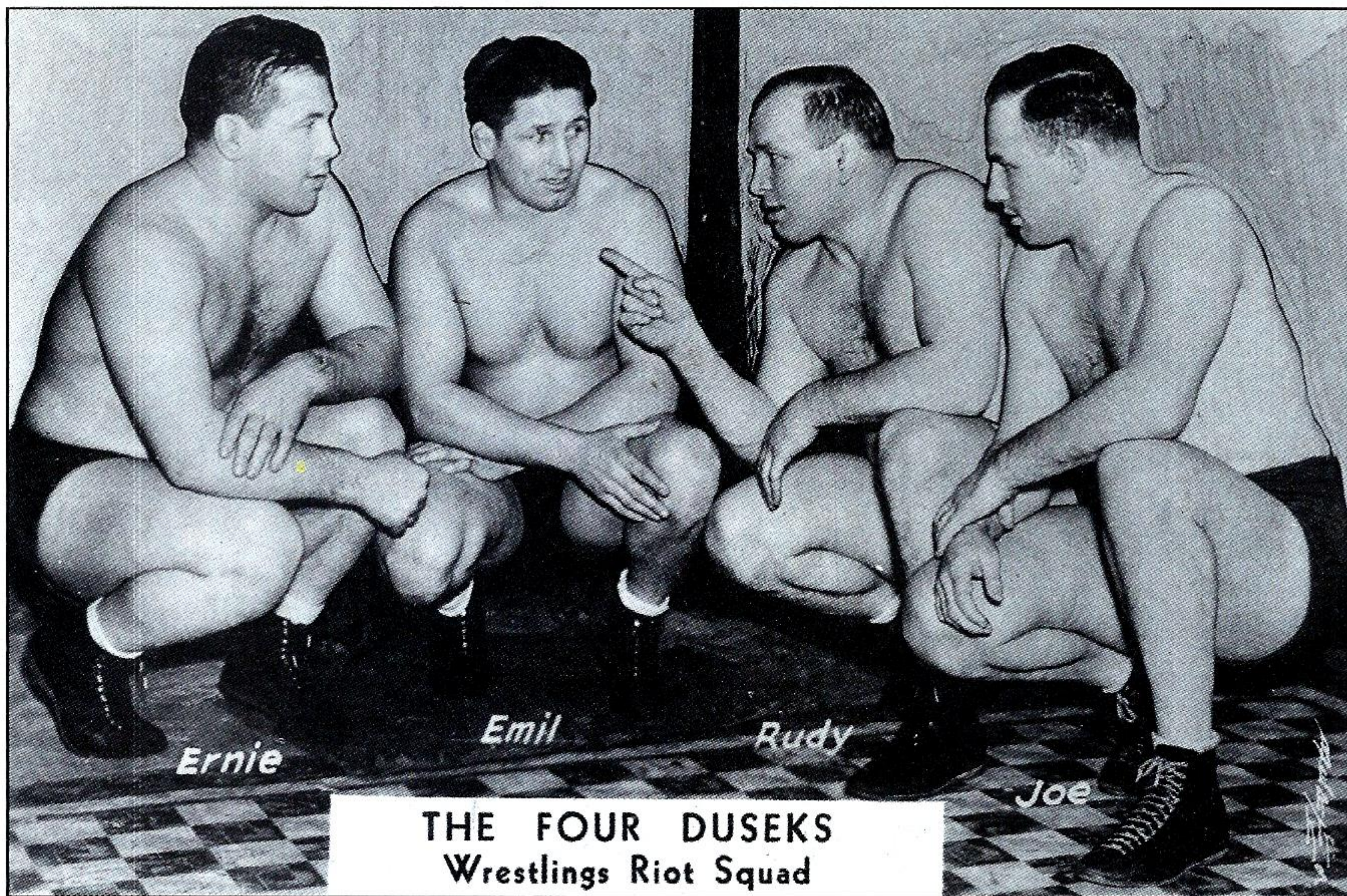
In each issue, *PWI* will honor one member of the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame, which we recognize as the sport's official Hall of Fame

team wrestling, and even dabbling in promoting.

"They were fabulous. They were the first of the modern era," said Bob Geigel in *The Pro Wrestling Hall Of Fame: The Tag Teams*, by Greg Oliver and Steven Johnson. "In their era, wrestling was heavier; stuff was stronger."

"If you couldn't wrestle and know what to do, they'd beat the crap out of you. They were tough that way,"

In fact, the four brothers were so popular and electric in the ring, they spawned a classic marketing tag-line promoters used whenever they were on the card: "Never a dull match with a Dusek."



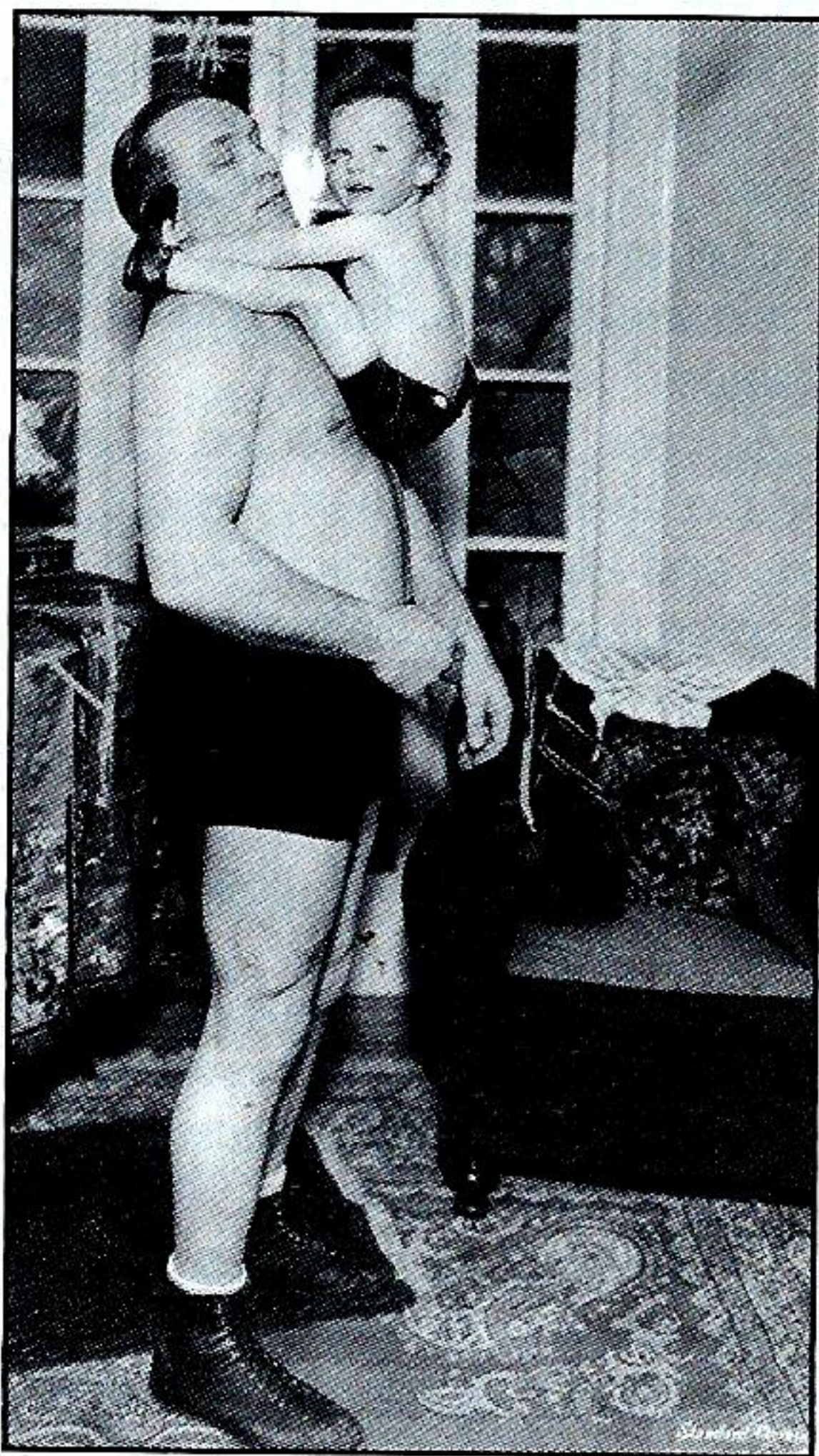
THE FOUR DUSEKS Wrestlings Riot Squad

The Dusek brothers were all early pioneers of the professional wrestling industry. While Ernie would gain the most fame as a singles wrestler, Joe and Emil revolutionized the burgeoning tag team style of the mid-20th Century. Rudy would eventually focus on the business end, teaching his brothers the finer points of the industry.

The wrestling Duseks—Rudy, Emil, Ernie, and Joe—were each born in Omaha, Nebraska, along with three other brothers and one lone sister. The eldest brother, Rudy (born in 1901), was the first to catch the wrestling bug, setting up a ring on the family property and training under wrestler Farmer Burns and at the local YMCA. Rudy won a state amateur title in 1918 and turned pro in 1922, competing in Little Rock, Arkansas.

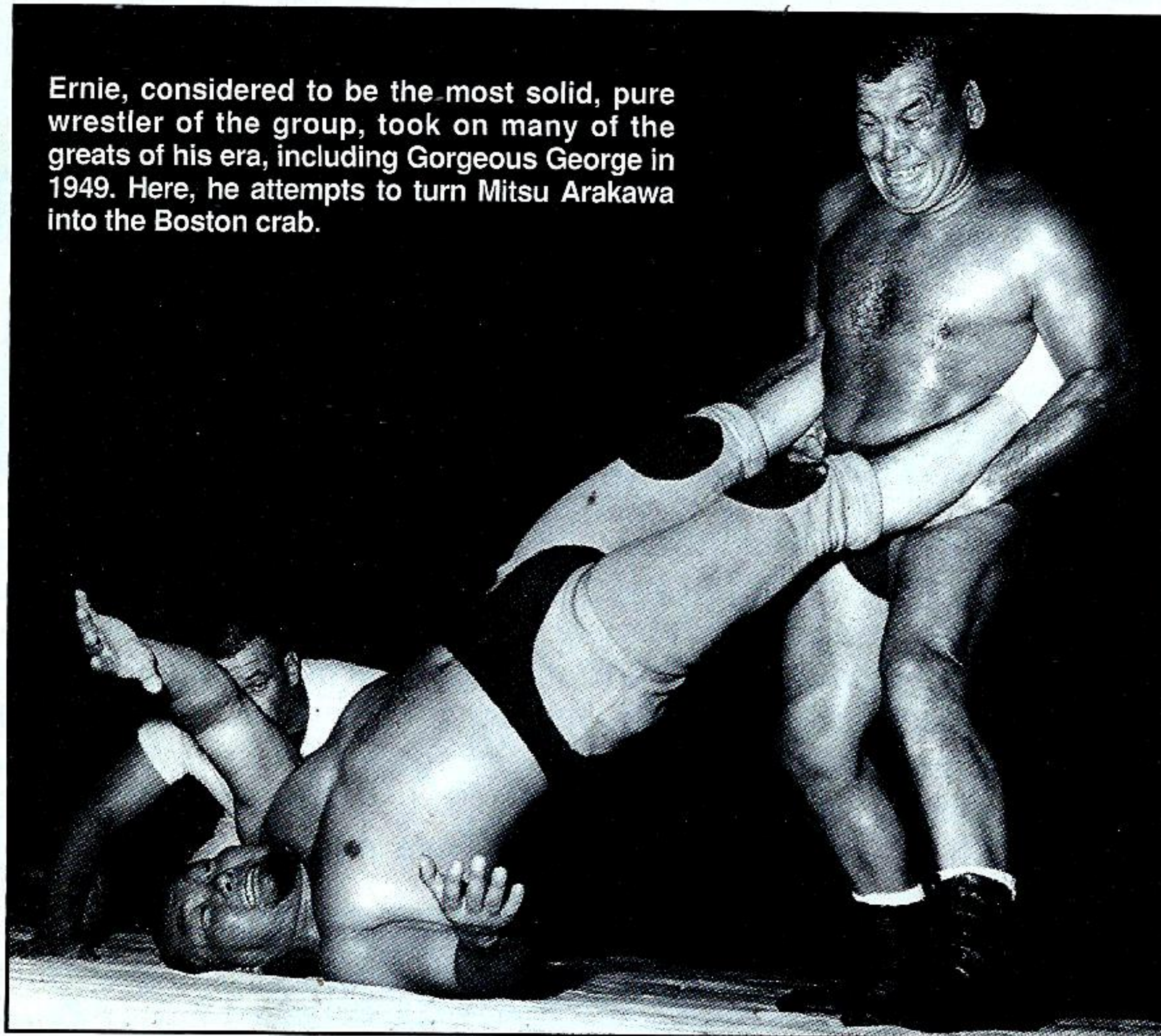
By 1930, Rudy had developed into a top contender for the NWA World title and wrestled champion Jim Londos in a two-hour match in Houston, but he failed to come away with the championship.

Emil and Ernie followed their brother into the sport. They originally worked as singles wrestlers, but became one of wrestling's first regular tag teams as the style began to catch on in the South and Midwest. In addition to being true tag team pioneers and creating some of the wrestling's first double-team moves,



Rudy was widely considered the businessman of the group, learning the promotional side of the industry in the New York territory and imparting that wisdom to his brothers. Here, Rudy's lighter side emerges as he poses for a shot with his daughter, Marie.

Ernie, considered to be the most solid, pure wrestler of the group, took on many of the greats of his era, including Gorgeous George in 1949. Here, he attempts to turn Mitsu Arakawa into the Boston crab.



Emil and Ernie were two of wrestling's first "rulebreakers." They used a stiff, rough style that had the fans booing whenever they squared off against the local favorites.

Rudy, Emil, Ernie, and younger brother Joe earned a reputation as rugged brawlers who would leave their opponents battered and bruised as they traveled through the Midwest, California, Texas, Florida, and Canada. Matchmakers began to bill the brothers as "The Dirty Duseks" or "The Dusek Riot Squad." Together, the four of them would also present "wrestling exhibitions" where they would tie each other up in knots, displaying their mastery of submission wrestling and counter wrestling. Some of the most famous photos of the brothers (including a feature in *Vogue* magazine in the 1950s) have all four together, a wriggling mass of arm-bars, leglocks, and headlocks.

Emil and Ernie held the NWA Central States tag title on three occasions between 1958 and 1960: the NWA San Francisco and NWA Southern tag titles in 1957, and regional tag titles in Nebraska and Toronto.

Of the four brothers, Ernie was widely considered to be the best pure wrestler. He even headlined

Madison Square Garden in 1949 against Gorgeous George, a man who could have been the polar opposite of the no-frills, tough Dusek boys. Ernie also traveled more than his brothers and received more national exposure.

In the 1930s, elder brother Rudy began to get involved in the promotional end of the New York City territory. He gradually reduced his wrestling schedule in favor of the business end and taught his brothers the trade of wrestling promoting. Rudy died in 1971 of a heart attack.

Joe (who, unlike his brothers, never liked to travel) followed Rudy into promoting and began running the Nebraska territory, where Ernie and Emil continued to work, either as singles wrestlers or a tag team until as late as 1960. Emil became a commercial fisherman after retirement and died in 1986. Joe and Ernie each died of congestive heart disease in 1992 and 1994, respectively.

In addition to helping popularize tag team wrestling and developing the "heel" style, the Duseks also helped dozens of young wrestlers get their start. They were top stars and major draws for two decades and are charter members of *The Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame. □

independent roundup

By Liz Hunter

AFTER A THREE-YEAR hiatus, Maryland Championship Wrestling made its long-awaited return with "Resurrection" on February 26. Incredibly, the card drew a reported 1,260 fans, making it one of the biggest independent cards of the year.

MCW helped launch the careers of some of wrestling's biggest stars, including **Matt Hardy**, **Joey Mercury**, and **Orlando Jordan**, all of whom were in at-

tendance at "Resurrection." Also enjoying the festivities were **Randy Orton**, **Rey Mysterio Jr.**, **Mark Henry**, **Gregory Helms**, and **Jonathan Coachman**. MCW had previously operated from 2001 through 2003 and had built a loyal fan base showcasing the likes of **The Backseat Boyz**, **Alexis (Mickie James) Laree**, and even Jerry Springer's chief of security, **Steve Wilkos**.

The event featured the first round of a tournament to crown a new heavyweight champion, as well as a four-way match to crown new tag team champions. The first-round tournament matches saw **Josh Daniels** defeat **Danny Jax**, **Genesis** defeat **The Blue Meanie**, **Julio Dinero** defeat Maryland legend **The Bruiser**, and **Danny Doring** defeat **Crowbar**.

In the tag team title bout, **The Slackers** (**Chad Bowman** and **Dino Divine**) outlasted **The Ghetto Mafia**, **The Holy Rollers**, and **Jason Static** and **Judas Young** to claim the tag belts. Unfortunately for The Slackers, their title reign wouldn't last long, as they were forced to defend their straps in a three-way against The Holy Rollers and **The James Gang** later that show. The former **New Age Outlaws** capitalized on the heel tactics of guest referee **Earl Hebner** and won the title. The main event had a Ring of Honor flair as **Samoa Joe** defeated **Roderick Strong**.

Exactly one month later, MCW presented its second show, featuring the finals of the heavyweight title tournament. Dinero and Genesis advanced to the finals, and Dinero scored the win to claim the belt. But the title changes weren't done. The team of Danny Doring and Danny Jax beat The James Gang and The Holy Rollers to win the tag title. **Christopher Daniels** even made a rare X division title defense outside of TNA, scoring a win over **A.J. Styles**.

Speaking of title tournaments, the tourney to crown a new OVW champion (**Matt Cappotelli** vacated the title after being diagnosed with brain cancer) came down to arch-rivals **Brent Albright** and **C.M. Punk**. The feud between Punk and Albright has been a modern-day OVW classic, and the March 1 championship match was a fitting chapter in their rivalry. Albright won the back-and-forth contest to win the championship, but Punk remains his most persistent (and dangerous) challenger.

OVW fans also saw a surprise title change on March 19. **Deuce Shade** beat **Mike "The Miz" Mizanin** to win the tag team title for the team of



Photos by Timothy A. Walker

Maryland Championship Wrestling returned with a tournament to crown the promotion's heavyweight champion after a three-year hiatus. The title was won by Julio Dinero (pictured, with braids) over his much larger opponent, Genesis.

Deuce and **Domino**. Mizanin's tag partner, **Chris Cage**, was released from his WWE developmental contract for disciplinary reasons. Deuce made the most of The Miz' predicament, winning the singles match to take the championship.

Quick title changes:

New Wrestling Horizons, Old Town, ME, February 23: **BullMoose Calhoun** and **Hardware** defeated **Alexander Chamberlain** and **Eric Atlas** to win the tag team title ... **New Wrestling Horizons, Old Town, ME, March 2:** **"Enforcer" Larry Huntley** pinned **Canadian Moondog** in a "bone on a pole" match to win the Maine State title ... **New Wrestling Horizons, Brewer, ME, March 11:** BullMoose Calhoun and Hardware defeated **The Glamour Shots** to win the tag team title ... **PWF-Mayhem, Quincy, MS, March 11:** **Evan Siks** beat **Triple-licious** by submission to win the heavyweight title ... **IWA-Flashfire, Lavonia, GA, March 11:** **Billy Starr** and **Pan-head Johnson** defeated the Kings of the South to win the vacant tag team title; **Tommy Sawyer** pinned **Don Matthews** to win the heavyweight title ... **EWF Pro Wrestling, Marion, IN, March 18:** **Zack McGuire** beat **Steve Amani** to win the Midwestern title ... **EWF, San Bernardino, CA, March 18:** **Syrus** defeated **Chavo Guerrero Jr.** to win the heavyweight title ... **Tennessee Independent Wrestling Federation, Brownsville, TN, March 19:** **Lawman Williams** defeated **Albino Rhino** to win the heavyweight title ... **Texas All-Star Wrestling, Port Lavaca, TX, March 25:** **Scoby Gober** won an "anything goes" battle royal to win the hardcore title ... **USWO, Nashville, TN, March**

24: **Shane Morton** beat **Larry Valentine** for the TV title ... **Atlantic Coast Pro Wrestling, Roseboro, NC, March 25:** **Josh Hunter** won a 16-man battle royal ladder match to win the Adrenaline title; **The Naturals** defeated **Perfect Creation** to win the tag team title ... **American Championship Wrestling, South Ogden, UT, March 25:** **Psycho** won the junior heavyweight title in a gauntlet match featuring **Mike Martinez**, **Jimmy Daniels**, **Eclipse**, and **Zen** ... **Tennessee Independent Wrestling Federation, Ripley, TN, March 25:** **Steven Rampage** defeated Lawman Williams for the heavyweight title ... **NWA Pro Wrestling Express, McKeesport, PA, March 25:** **Bigg** and **Nikita Allanov** beat **Devin Devine** and



In a rare, non-TNA title defense, then-X division champion Christopher Daniels successfully retained the title, defeating A.J. Styles.

Chris Taylor for the tag belts ... **Underground Wrestling Society, Wooster, OH, March 25:** **Damien Cross** won a blindfold battle royal to win the heavyweight title ... **NWA-Cyberspace, Dover, NJ, March 26:** **The Spanish Announce Team** defeated **All Money Is Legal**, **Archadia**, and **Grim Reefer** in a TLC match to win the tag team title; **The BX Express** defeated **Brian Myers** and **Brett Matthews** for the NYWC tag title; **Bobby Roode** beat **Matt Bentley**, **Mana the Polynesian Warrior**, and **Rodney Mack** in a four-way match for the heavyweight title ... **Central Wrestling Federation, Lafayette, IN, March 26:** **Shawn Cook** beat **P.T. Hussla** for the heavyweight title. □

the international report

By Mike Spillane

THE JAPANESE PRESS has been lauding **Minoru Fujita** and **Ikuto Hidaka** as the best tag team in the world for a few years now. They've taken a major step forward in getting greater recognition now that the two Zero One Max regulars have captured tag team gold in Pro Wrestling NOAH. Hidaka and Fujita unseated **Yoshinobu Kanemaru** and **Takashi Sugiura** for the Global Honored Crown junior heavyweight tag team title in March. In the past, the duo has held international tag team championships and has been named Tag Team of the Year by Japanese wrestling magazines that typically reserve such an honor for heavyweights. In becoming

NOAH champions, Hidaka and Fujita are poised to make an even bigger impact on the scene. With the recent downturn of business for both New Japan Pro Wrestling and All Japan Pro Wrestling, NOAH has solidified its position as the top *puroresu* promotion today.

One of Mexico's most exciting *tecnicos*, **Black Warrior**, has turned *rudo* in an effort to dethrone **Mistico**, who is undeniably the country's most spectacular performer. In the early months of 2006, Black Warrior and Mistico teamed together to make a run at the CMLL tag team title, held by Mistico's perennial rivals **Averno** and **Mephisto**. When they finally arrived at the title match,

having beaten the champs in non-title action, Warrior made his turn, and then went on to pull off Mistico's mask. These two top-notch high-flyers will be meeting in singles action for the first time shortly before this issue hits newsstands. Both have hinted that a mask vs. mask match may be imminent. Black Warrior is now aligned with Averno and Mephisto, and it may not be long before they pursue the CMLL trios title.

The ace of the now-defunct Toryumon 2000 Project (or T2P, for short), **Milano Collection AT**, has been having a great deal of success on the American independent scene since relocating to San Antonio last year. After becoming lost in the mix of the talent-rich Dragon Gate promotion, he went freelance in early-2005 and left Japan altogether. A regular in both the Texas-based TWE and Pennsylvania's CHIKARA, Milano has also popped up everywhere from Ring of Honor to IWA Mid-South. In terms of high-profile tournaments, Milano is having his pick of the litter this year, already making it to the finals of the 32-team Tag World



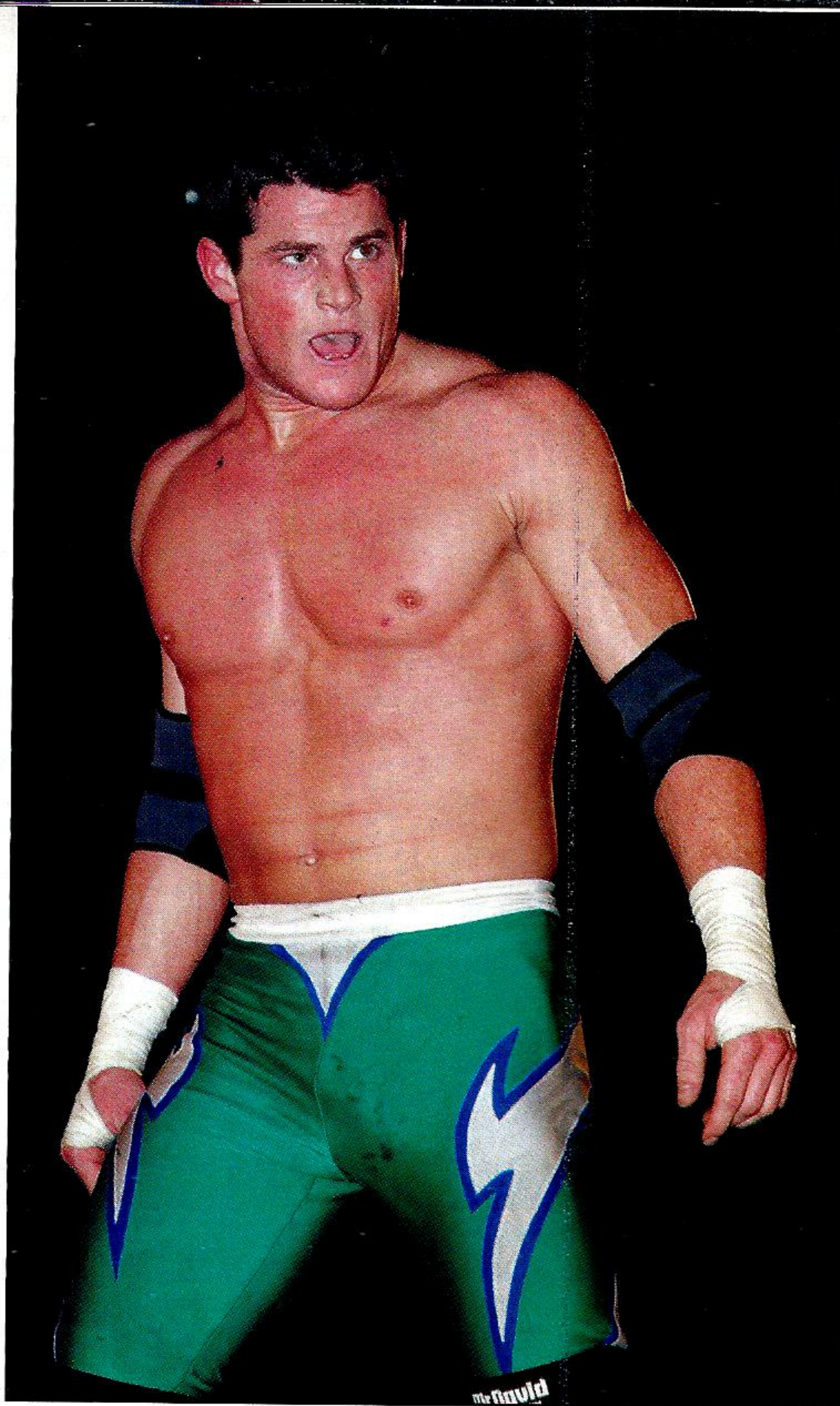
CHIKARA's Tag World Grand Prix attracted talent from around the globe, including DDT's top stars MIKAMI (right, against NOAH's Miyawaki) and KUDO. The tournament champions were the U.S.'s Chris Hero and Claudio Castagnoli.

Grand Prix alongside his trainer **Skayde**, and he made a huge impact at the 10th annual Super 8 tournament held by the ECWA. Milano will also be a featured player in the newly formed Dragon Door offshoot, called "El Dorado."

Speaking of the Tag World Grand Prix, a host of international wrestlers made their way to the United States to compete for CHIKARA's newly created tag team title. **Taka Michinoku**'s Kaientai Dojo group sent **MIYAWAKI** and kickboxer **Yoshiaki Yago** as representatives, and the DDT promotion sent top stars **MIKAMI** and **KUDO**. Freelance *joshi* stars **Ranmaru** and **Sumie Sakai** were one of three female duos entered in the tournament. Recent departures from New Japan **Osamu "Mr. Muga" Nishimura** and **Katsushi Takemura** paired up and made it all the way to the final eight before being eliminated by Milano Collection AT and Skayde. Other Toryumon representatives included **Shinjitsu Nohashi** and **Amigo Suzuki**. The tournament was ultimately won by **Chris Hero** and Switzerland's **Claudio Castagnoli** (Castagnoli also won the 2005 Tag World Grand Prix with then-partner **Arik Cannon**).

Ring of Honor and TNA star **Matt Sydal** will join fellow independent **Jack Evans** in Japan for an extended tour with Magnum Tokyo's Dragon Gate promotion. Sydal, 23, of St. Louis, made his way up through the independent ranks and developed into a cutting-edge high-flyer. One of the scene's most in-demand performers, Sydal was recently recruited for the MTV project called "Wrestling Society X," which, as of press time, remained an unsold pilot for the 2006 fall television season. The program is a mix of fast-paced wrestling action and music performed by alternative and underground rock acts. Sydal will conclude an overseas tour of Germany (wXw), England (IPW), and Austria (Rings of Europe) before returning home to prepare for his two-month stay in Japan under Dragon Gate. Currently, Dragon Gate stars like **Genki Horiguchi**, **Yoshino**, **Dragon Kid**, and **CIMA** are here in the States for a short stay, appearing with Ring of Honor for a string of live events in the Midwest. Dragon Gate has been edging its way toward becoming one of Japan's biggest promotions over the past year, drawing a unique audience of hardcore fans and young Japanese women to see their blend of traditional *puroresu* infused wrestling with a *lucha libre* influence. This should come as no surprise, as virtually every wrestler on the Dragon Gate roster originally trained in Naucalpan, Mexico.

Arena Mexico was packed to the rafters in late-March to see a hair vs. hair match pitting crowd favorite **Perro Aguayo, Jr.** against aging *rudo* **Universo 2000**. Universo and his *Hermanos Dinamitas* ("Dynamite Brothers"), **Cien Caras** and **Mascara Ano 2000**, have a long history with the Aguayo family and delivered the piledriver that injured **Perro Aguayo Sr.**, forcing him into retirement. Aguayo Jr. managed to gain revenge on the *Dinamitas* in the end of the heated contest that had the



Matt Sydal has become one of the hottest commodities on the independent circuit, and now he will call Magnum Tokyo's Dragon Gate promotion home for a two-month tour.

crowd on the verge of riot more than once. Perro and Universo split the first two falls. In the deciding fall, Perro used a small package to hold Universo down, leading to an explosive response from the live crowd. Universo had his head shaved in the ring as members of his family looked on. The event proved to be the hottest ticket in Mexico in months for CMLL, as all seats were sold out virtually minutes after they went on sale, which is something of a rarity in Mexico City.

The president of Puerto Rican promotion IWA and a longtime liaison to WWE, **Victor Quinones**, passed away just before press time, and the exact cause of death was unknown. Quinones led IWA to become the predominant promotion in Puerto Rico, surpassing **Carlos Colon**'s long-running WWC group. He was also instrumental in bringing international talent to the then-WWF in the late-1990s, such as Taka Michinoku and the Headhunters. We'll have more details as they become available. □

arena reports

We encourage promoters and readers to e-mail results to:

PWIResults@yahoo.com

Please try to utilize the exact format you see in the "Arena Reports" that follow; it will help us greatly and make it more likely that your report will be used.

Spotlight Card of the Month

NEWARK, DE—East Coast Wrestling Association Super 8 Tournament at the Greater Newark Boys & Girls Club: **Quarterfinals:** Davey Richards pinned Scott Lost ... Josh Daniels beat Andre Lyon ... Charlie Haas defeated Xavier by submission ... Milano Collection AT pinned Bryan Logan ... **Semifinals:** Charlie Haas beat Josh Daniels ... Davey Richards pinned Milano Collection AT ... Matt Logan won the ECWA Summit battle royal ... **Finals:** Davey Richards pinned Charlie Haas ... **Non-tournament match:** Matt Logan won the ECWA Summit battle royal. (04-08-06)

—Spotlight Photos By Joe Zanolle

UNITED STATES

ALABAMA

BIRMINGHAM—WWE at BJCC Arena: Ric Flair beat Intercontinental champion Shelton Benjamin by disqualification ... Kane defeated Triple-H ... Shane McMahon pinned Shawn Michaels ... Vince McMahon beat Shawn Michaels ... Kenny of The Spirit Squad defeated Eugene ... Lita pinned Maria ... WWE champion John Cena defeated The Big Show in a non-title match. (03-06-06)

—Nate Hightower

MOBILE—WWE at Mobile Civic Center Arena: Matt Hardy defeated Chuck Palumbo ... Super Crazy pinned Simon Dean ... Kid Kash & Jamie Noble beat Scotty 2 Hotty & Sho Funaki ... Tatanka defeated Frankie Ciasto ... Smackdown tag team champions M-N-M defeated Paul London & Brian Kendrick ... Finlay and Bobby Lashley went to a no-contest ... Paul Birchall pinned William Regal ... Kristal defeated Jillian Hall in a "Diva's Undressed" match ... Chris Benoit beat Gregory Helms via submission ... Rey Misterio Jr. & Kurt Angle wrestled Mark Henry & Randy Orton to a no-contest ... The Undertaker defeated Randy Orton & Mark Henry in a handicap match. (03-07-06)

—Nate Hightower

ARKANSAS

HARRISON—Mid-States Wrestling at the Fairgrounds Indoor Expo Building: Derek Stone defeated Mason Hunter ... Jack Dalton defeated Tanker ... Jake Boulder defeated Michael Barry to win the vacant All-Star Wrestling heavyweight title ... The Crazy 88's defeated The Spanish Flyboys ... Gary Gram defeated Christopher Vincent ... Stephen E. defeated Craig Kessaman in a "Lights Out" blindfold match ... Seth Allen defeated Phil Lawrence ... Gary Gram, Jason Jones, & Phil Lawrence defeated Kenny Campbell, Kevin Lovejones, Christopher Vincent, & Mitch Carter in an eight-man tag team match. (04-08-06)

—Mike Iles

CALIFORNIA

SACRAMENTO—Supreme Pro Wrestling at the Historic Colonial Theatre: Ryan Drago beat Jesus Kruze by submission ... D-Unit pinned Champ Steel ... Mike Rayne pinned Mr. Frost ... D.J. Rizz beat Kenny K and Virgil Flynn in a three-way match ... Seito Hayashi wrestled Timothy Thatcher to a no-contest ... Shane Dynasty, Trent Hemridge, & Luster the Legend beat Bruce B., El Hijo de Chupacabra, & Rik

Luxury ... J.D. Bishop & Vinny Massaro beat Adam Thornstowe & Sir Samurai ... Heavyweight champ Oliver John beat Paul Isadora by countout. (04-08-06)

—Tim Moura

DELAWARE

FREDERICA—Dynamite Championship Wrestling at Bower's Beach Fire House: The Gemini Trojans beat Crazy Shea & Chris Nightmare to retain the tag team title ... Massive Mike defeated J.J. Times in a leather strap match ... Gemini pinned Party Boy ... Ryan Prime defeated C.J. O' Doyle with by disqualification ... Jason Static defeated The Dragonfly ... Zac Conner defeated Cremator to retain the International heavyweight title ... Bazooka Joe defeated Andrew Steele in a straight-jacket match ... Chris Wylde defeated Shaka to retain the DCW No Limits title. (04-01-06)

—Til Lindema

FLORIDA

ORLANDO—TNA at Universal Studios: Jeff Jarrett, Abyss, & America's Most Wanted beat Norman Smiley, Shark Boy, Buck Quartermain, & Cassidy Riley in an eight-



Former champions pose before the Super 8 tournament with the coveted trophy. From left to right: Ace Darling, Simon Diamond, Christopher Daniels, Low Ki, Donovan Morgan, and Petey Williams.

man tag team match ... **Lance Hoyt** pinned **Kenny King** ... **Team Canada** defeated **Jay Lethal**, **Chris Sabin**, & **Sonjay Dutt** in a six-man tag team match ... **Samoa Joe** & **Shannon Moore** beat **Christopher Daniels** & **A.J. Styles**.
(03-04-06)

—Jo Ann Richards

ORLANDO—TNA at Universal Studios: **America's Most Wanted** beat **The Naturals** ... **Chris Sabin** defeated **Alex Shelley** and **Sonjay Dutt** in a three-way match ... **Ron Killings**, **Team 3D**, & **Rhino** beat **Shannon Moore**, **Diamonds In The Rough**, & **Matt Bentley** in an eight-man tag team match ... **Ron Killings** & **The Naturals** beat **Team Canada** in a six-man tag team match ... **Diamonds In The Rough** defeated **Lance Hoyt**, **Shark Boy**, & **Jay Lethal**.
(03-11-06)

—Jo Ann Richards

ORLANDO—TNA Destination X pay-per-view at Universal Studios: **Alex Shelley** defeated **Jay Lethal** ... **Lance Hoyt** beat **Matt Bentley** ... **Team Canada** defeated **The Naturals** ... **The James Gang** & **Bob Armstrong** beat **LAX** ... **Chris Sabin** pinned **Puma** to win the International X Showcase match, with **Petey Williams** and **Sonjay Dutt** also competing ... **Jeff Jarrett**, **America's Most Wanted**, & **Abyss** beat **Team 3D**, **Ron Killings**, & **Rhino** in an eight-man war ... **Christopher Daniels** won the Ultimate X match over **Samoa Joe** and **A.J. Styles** to become the X champion ... NWA heavyweight champion **Christian Cage** defeated **Monty Brown**.
(03-12-06)

—J.M. Joly

ORLANDO—TNA at Universal Studios: **Sonjay Dutt** defeated **Matt Bentley** and **Elix Skipper** to qualify for **Team TNA** in the **World X Cup** ... **Abyss** beat **Cassidy Riley** ... **Shark Boy** & **Norman Smiley** defeated **LAX** ... **Ron Killings**, **A.J. Styles**, **Rhino**, & **Christopher Daniels** beat **Alex Shelley**, **Shannon Moore**, & **America's Most Wanted** in an eight-man tag team match.
(03-18-06)

—J.M. Joly

ORLANDO—TNA at Universal Studios: **Scott Steiner** & **Jeff Jarrett** vs. **The Naturals** was declared a no-contest, as the bell never rang to start the match ... **Chris Sabin**, **Jay Lethal**, & **Sonjay Dutt** defeated **The Diamonds In The Rough** in a six-man tag team match ... **Team 3D** beat **Team Canada** in the **Six Sides of Steel**.
(03-25-06)

—Carter Lanoux

ORLANDO—TNA at Universal Studios: **America's Most Wanted** defeated **The James Gang** ... **Samoa Joe** beat **Sonjay Dutt**, **Alex Shelley**, and **Chris Sabin** in a four-way match.
(04-01-06)

—Dave Cataldi

ORLANDO—TNA at Universal Studios: **Abyss** vs. **A.J. Styles** went to a no-contest ... An arm-wrestling contest between



The tournament opener featured two of the West Coast's finest indy competitors, with Davey Richards recovering from this torture rack to get the hard-fought victory over Scott Lost.

Konnan and **Bob Armstrong** went to a no-contest when **Hotstuff Hernandez** interfered ... **Alex Shelley** defeated **Roderick Strong** and **Chase Stevens** to gain the final spot on **Team USA** in the **World X Cup** tournament.
(04-08-06)

—Ean Kyle

ed tag team champs **Billy Starr** & **Panhead Nelson** and **Don Matthews** & **Lance Christopher** in a three-way match to win the tag team title ... Hogg won a "winner's choice battle royal" and chose a title match with **Sawyer** for an upcoming show as his prize.
(04-08-06)

—Brad Bates

GEORGIA

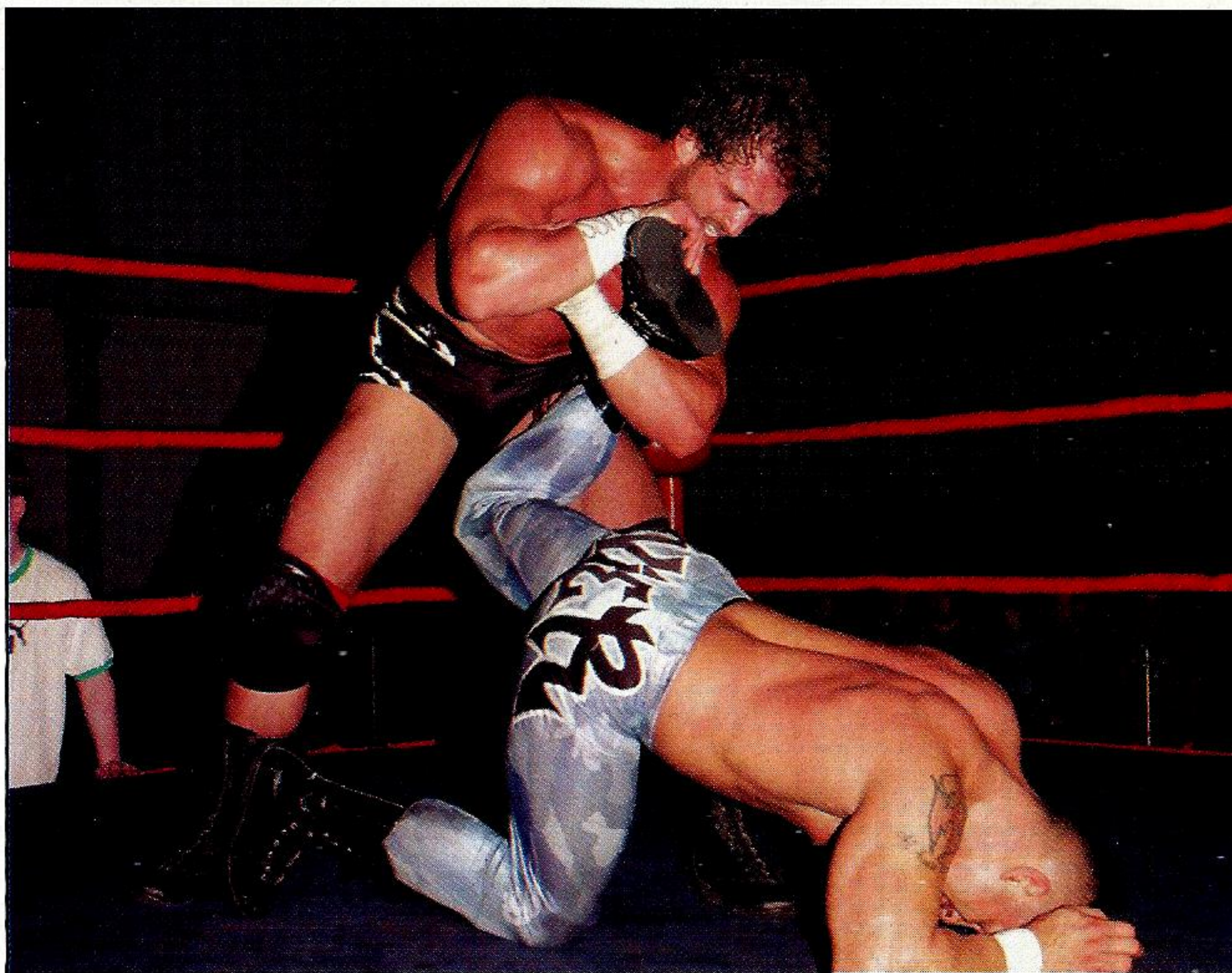
DUBLIN—GIWA at the Dublin Center: **Terry Simms** beat **Loco Motive** ... **Firewalker**, **Chris Cage**, & **Dan Ivey** beat **Oko Nono**, **Leatherface**, & **Damien Dread** ... **Johnny Camo** beat **Jake Slater** ... Mid-State champion **Velvet Jones** beat **Preston Paradise** ... **Chris Giles** & **Jason Stone** beat tag team champions **Mike Stratus** and **Big Daddy Osborne** for the title ... Heavyweight champion **The Professor** beat **The Freak** to retain the title.
(04-01-06)

—Theo Simms

HARTWELL—IWA Flashfire at the National Guard Armory: Internet champ **War Machine Nitro** fought **Lance Christopher** to a double-countout ... **Xion the Heretic** pinned **Bubba Hogg** ... **Sgt. Grimm** pinned **War Machine Tank** to win the U.S. title ... Heavyweight champion **Tommy Sawyer** pinned **Dale Dwindle** ... **The Kings of the South** defeat-

ILLINOIS

CHICAGO—WWE WrestleMania 22 pay-per-view at AllState Arena: World tag team champions **The Big Show** & **Kane** defeated **Carlito Caribbean Cool** & **Chris Masters** ... **Rob Van Dam** won the six-way "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder match that also included **Bobby Lashley**, **Matt Hardy**, **Fit Finlay**, **Ric Flair**, and **Shelton Benjamin** ... **John Bradshaw Layfield** beat **Chris Benoit** to win the U.S. championship ... **Edge** defeated **Mick Foley** in a hardcore match ... **The Boogeyman** beat **Booker T** & **Sharmell** ... **Mickie James** pinned **Trish Stratus** to win the women's championship ... **The Undertaker** beat **Mark Henry** in a "casket match" ... **Shawn Michaels** pinned **Vince McMahon** ... **Rey Mysterio Jr.** beat **Randy Orton** and **Kurt Angle** in a three-way match to win the World championship ... **Torrie Wilson** defeated **Candice Michelle** in a "Playboy Pillow Fight" match ... WWE champion



Charlie Haas applies an anklelock against late-entry Xavier and went on to win this quarterfinal match. Haas' experience and superior athleticism would carry him to the tournament finals.

John Cena beat Triple-H by submission.
(04-02-06)

—Antonio Moral

CHICAGO—WWE at All-State Arena: The Spirit Squad defeated The Big Show & Kane to win the Word tag team championship ... Chris Masters beat Eric Priest by submission ... Mickie James & Candice Michelle defeated Trish Stratus & Torrie Wilson ... Intercontinental champion Shelton Benjamin beat Chavo Guerrero Jr. ... Triple-H & Edge defeated John Cena in a handicap match.
(04-03-06)

—Antonio Moral

PEORIA—WWE at Peoria Civic Center: Spanky Kendrick & Paul London beat Smackdown tag team champions M-N-M in a non-title match ... Gunner Scott defeated Booker T ... Chris Benoit beat Simon Dean ... World champion Rey Mysterio Jr. beat Randy Orton ... Paul Birchall beat William Regal ... The Undertaker defeated Mark Henry.
(04-07-06)

—Andrew Moral

INDIANA

DUNKIRK—Extreme Wrestling Federation at the West Jay Community Center: The Unholy Alliance beat Locked 'n' Loaded, Crushed Velvet, and The Clash ... Tommy Gage defeated Hank Calhoun ... Big Time Bob beat Mr. Main Event ... Jimmy Jacobs beat Tiny Tim ... Fallen Dragon & Hypnosis beat The Unholy Alliance by disqualification ... Osyris beat Zack McGuire by countout ... J.T. Zorin beat Rastakhan ...

Gunner Hansen beat Tracy Smothers.
(04-07-06)

—Jayson Maples

MARION—Extreme Wrestling Federation at the EWF Arena: Tag team champions Hypnosis & Fallen Dragon defeated The Unholy Alliance ... Samoa Joe beat Gunner Hansen ... Jimmy Jacobs defeated Johnny Dynamo ... Delirious pinned Joni Chingas ... Rastakhan beat Josh Abercrombie ... Jacobs pinned Delirious ... Samoa Joe beat Rastakhan ... Noah Lott defeated champion Jack Thriller, Game Boy, and Big Time Bob ... Samoa Joe defeated Jimmy Jacobs.
(04-08-06)

—Jayson Maples

IOWA

SPENCER—WWE at Clay County Regional Events Center: Kane beat Chris Masters ... The Spirit Squad defeated Val Venis, Viscera, & Eugene in a six-man tag team match ... Carlito Caribbean Cool pinned Chavo Guerrero Jr. ... Torrie Wilson & Maria beat Candice Michelle & Victoria in a "bra and panties" match ... Intercontinental champion Shelton Benjamin pinned Rob Van Dam ... Triple-H beat The Big Show ... WWE champion John Cena beat Edge in a streetfight.
(03-25-06)

—Ray Davis

LOUISIANA

ALEXANDRIA—WWE at Rapides Parish Coliseum: Bobby Lashley beat Sylvan ... Smackdown tag team champions M-N-M

defeated The Mexicools ... Road Warrior Animal pinned Matt Hardy ... Sho Funaki beat Jamie Noble and Kid Kash in a three-way match ... The Boogeyman pinned Simon Dean ... Paul Birchall defeated William Regal ... U.S. champion Chris Benoit pinned Booker T ... Kurt Angle & Rey Mysterio Jr. beat Randy Orton & Mark Henry.
(03-11-06)

—Carter Lanoux

LAFAYETTE—WWE at Lafayette Cajundome: Sho Funaki beat Kid Kash and Jamie Noble in a three-way match ... Road Warrior Animal defeated Matt Hardy ... Smackdown tag team champions M-N-M beat The Mexicools ... Paul Birchall pinned William Regal ... The Boogeyman beat Sylvan ... Bobby Lashley defeated Simon Dean ... U.S. champion Chris Benoit defeated Booker T ... World champion Kurt Angle beat Rey Mysterio Jr., Mark Henry, and Randy Orton in a four-way match.
(03-12-06)

—Brian McKeough

MONROE—WWE at Monroe Civic Center: U.S. champion Chris Benoit defeated Booker T ... Mark Henry won a 16-man over-the-top-rope battle royal ... Super Crazy & Psychosis defeated Kid Kash & Jamie Noble ... Rey Mysterio Jr. & Bobby Lashley beat Smackdown tag team champions M-N-M by disqualification ... World champion Kurt Angle beat Mark Henry via disqualification.
(03-13-06)

—Carter Lanoux

BOSSIER CITY—WWE at Century Tel-Center: Finlay beat Bobby Lashley in a "Money-In-The-Bank" qualifying match ... Paul Birchall & Krystal defeated William Regal & Jillian Hall ... Booker T pinned Jeromy Young ... Matt Hardy beat Animal by disqualification ... Chris Benoit beat Orlando Jordan by submission ... Randy Orton, Rey Mysterio Jr., & Kurt Angle defeated M-N-M & Mark Henry.
(03-17-06)

—Brian McKeough

MASSACHUSETTS

NEW BEDFORD—Top Rope Promotions at the Top Rope Arena: Huey McGraw pinned Stockade ... Brickhouse Baker beat Dickie Rodz ... Johnny Angel defeated Gino Giovanni ... Pride beat The Stroke by disqualification when Lance Silva interfered ... Jay Jaillette pinned heavyweight champion Scott Ashworth to win the title after Johnny Angel interfered ... Tag team champions The Angus Brothers defeated The Hot Shots ... Interstate champion Nick Steel beat Joe Chece by disqualification ... Big Daddy Bravo pinned Rick Fuller.
(04-01-06)

—Shawn O'Domski

MICHIGAN

PLYMOUTH—TNA at Compuware Arena: **Shark Boy** beat **Simon Diamond** ... **Chris Sabin** defeated **Alex Shelley** ... **Insane Clown Posse** beat **Team Canada** ... **Bobby Roode** pinned **Jerry Lynn** ... **Sabu** defeated **Abyss** in a no-disqualification streetfight ... **Rhino** beat **A-1** ... **Samoa Joe** defeated **A.J. Styles** by submission ... **America's Most Wanted** beat **The Naturals** ... NWA heavyweight champion **Christian Cage** defeated **Jeff Jarrett**. (03-17-06)

—Dan Israel

DETROIT—WWE *Saturday Night's Main Event* at Cobo Arena: **The Big Show** defeated **Carlito Caribbean Cool** ... **Triple-H & John Cena** beat **Kurt Angle, Rey Mysterio Jr., & Randy Orton** ... **Trish Stratus & Mickie James** defeated **Victoria & Candice Michelle** ... **Shane McMahon** defeated **Shawn Michaels** via submission when **Vince McMahon** called for the bell. (03-18-06)

—Dave Barrett

MISSISSIPPI

JACKSON—WWE at Mississippi Coliseum: **Eugene** beat **Lance Cade** ... **Maria & Torrie Wilson** defeated **Candice Michelle & Victoria** ... **Viscera & Val Venis** beat **Tyson Tomko & Snitsky** ... Women's champion **Trish Stratus** pinned **Mickie James** ... Intercontinental champion **Shelton Benjamin** beat **Rob Van Dam** ... **Ric Flair, The Big Show, & Kane** defeated **Triple-H, Carlito Caribbean Cool, & Chris Masters** in a six-man tag team match ... WWE champion **John Cena** beat **Edge** in a "Mississippi Streetfight." (03-19-06)

—Seamus Taggart

MISSOURI

MEHLVILLE—Gateway Championship Wrestling at the VFW Hall: **Rebecca Raze** pinned **Super Castaldi IV** ... **D.N.S.** defeated **Nick Tyson & Michael Serious** ... **Bryan Monterro** pinned **Sean Vincent** ... **Kory Twist** won a three-way dance beating **OuttKaSt** and **Pierre Abernathy** ... Light heavyweight champion **Jackal** defeated **Gary Jay** ... **Dingo** beat **Kevin X** ... **K.C. Karrington** pinned **Chaz Wesson** ... Heavyweight champion **Cameron Cage** defeated **Shorty Biggs**. (04-07-06)

—Patrick Brandmeyer

NEW JERSEY

CARTERET—National Wrestling Superstars at the Holy Family Church Parish Hall: **Nicky Oceans** defeated **El Poco Libro** ... **Dallas Page** defeated **Corrupted Youth** ... **Hasheem Ali** defeated **Jorge Rivera** ... **T-N-T & Saddam Insane** went to a no-contest with **The Badda Bing Boys** ... **Corvis Fear** defeated **Slayer & Antonio Malave** ... **Kamala** defeated **Sal Sincere**. (04-07-06)

—Dylan Gilligan

SEWELL—Devastation Wrestling Federation at the Powerhouse Gym: **Twiggy Ramirez** pinned **Problem Child** ... **Dark Sinner** beat **Saw, The Universe, and Tommy Force** in a three-way dance ... **Patch** pinned **Breaker Morant** ... **Brute Force** beat **Big L and JoJo** in a three-way match ... **Blood** defeated **Atticus Rheighns** ... **Manthing** beat **Cousin Clem & Crazy** in a handicap match ... **Chris Steele & Crazy Shea** defeated **B.D.P.** by disqualification ... **Vinny the Fixxer** pinned **Maverick** to retain the Jersey State title. (04-08-06)

—Luke McFadden

OHIO

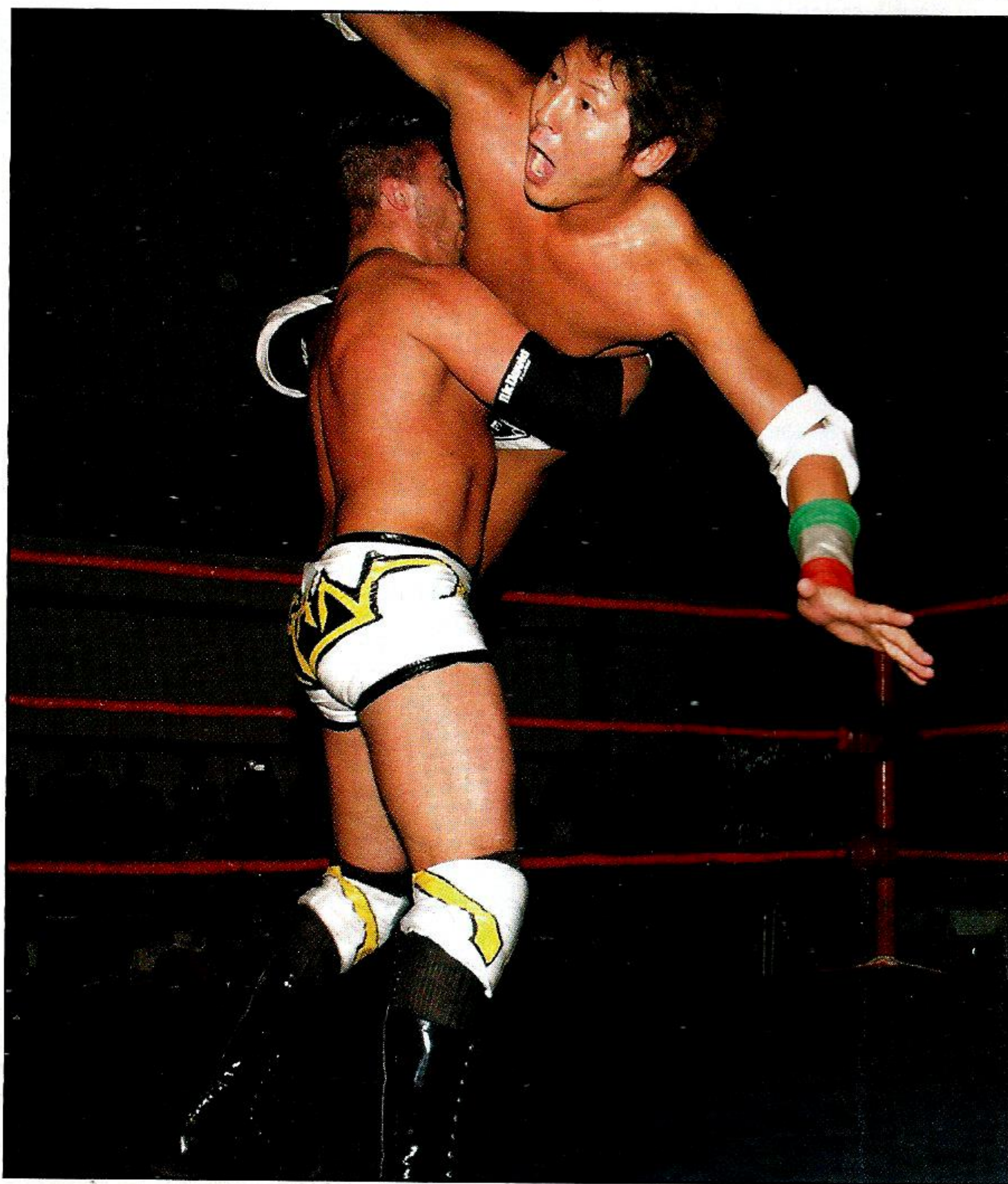
CINCINNATI—Northern Wrestling Federation at Bonecrushers Training Center: **Austin Meddler** defeated **T-Money** ... **Matt Parks** wrestled **The Zodiac** to a time-limit draw ... Tri-State champ **Dustin Lillard** defeated **King Kahuna** in a "First Blood" match ... **Muldoon** defeated **Dr. Melvin Winkleman** ... **Rory Fox** beat **Ice** by submission ... Tag team champs **T-N-T** beat **The Hippies and The Thugs** in a three-way match ... **Pepper** beat heavyweight champ **Ryan Stone** by countout. (04-01-06)

—Thomas Fisher

CLEVELAND—Cleveland All Pro Wrestling at Turner's Hall: **The Bouncer, Ironman, & Jefferson Starr** defeated **Brandon X, Barry Sagittarius, & Ryan Rush** ... **Kenny Hendrix** beat **Chris Cronus** ... **Da Munchies** defeated **J.T. Lightning & Johnny Walker** by disqualification ... **Lars Rockne** beat **Dave Demarco** ... **Bane & Raymond Rowe** beat **Faith N' Nothing** ... **Canadian Bad Boy** beat **K.C. Blood** in a falls-count-anywhere match ... Tag team champs **Q&A** defeated **Johnny Gargano & Dios Salvador** ... Junior heavyweight champ **Matt Stryker** defeated **Zack Storm** ... **Sumie Sakai** beat **Portia Perez** ... Unified heavyweight champion **Adam Cage** beat **Chris Kole** ... **Rhino** beat **Samoa Joe** ... **Abdullah the Butcher** defeated **Michael Hellborn** in a hardcore match. (04-09-06)

—Johnny James

ELYRIA—Mega Championship Wrestling at Lorain County Community College: **Los Scrubs** defeated **Dave Cruz & Louis St. Clair** ... **Christian Vaughn** defeated **Billy Taylor** ... **Nick Tatum & Screwy Louie** beat **Da Munchies** ... **Jason Havok** defeated **T.J. Cannon** ... **Dubleve** defeated **Shawn Blaze** ... **Nick Ritters** beat light heavyweight champ **Marion Fontaine** by disqualification



Bryan Logan thwarts Milano Collection AT's cross-bodyblock attempt. Milano was without a doubt the most entertaining competitor on the card.

... Klub X-treme beat The Perfect Team to win the tag team titles ... U.S. champ **Chris Kole** defeated **Aero** and **Glenn Spectre** in a triple-threat match ... Commissioner **Darren Davenport**, **Brandon X**, & **Christian Faith** beat MCW owner **Fresh Aaronson**, **Chuck Brody**, & **Traz** in a "Fans-Bring-The-Weapons" streetfight. (04-01-06)

—Johnny James

WILMINGTON—Northern Wrestling Federation at the Fairgrounds Expo Center: NWF Tri-State champ **Dustin Lillard** beat **T-Money** ... **Ice & Zodiac** defeated **The New Weird Science** ... **Roger Ruffen** beat **Austin Meddler** ... **Matt Parks** pinned **Pompano Joe** ... **Jeremy Hyde** beat **Jesse Hyde** ... Tag team champs **T-N-T** beat **Sin-D's Thugs** ... **Pepper** defeated heavy-weight champ **Ryan Stone** by countout. (04-08-06)

—Thomas Fisher

OKLAHOMA

TULSA—WWE at Tulsa Convention Center: **Booker T** vs. **The Boogeyman** went to a no-contest ... **Road Warrior Animal** defeated **Matt Hardy** ... Smackdown tag team champions **M-N-M** beat **Paul London** & **Spanky Kendrick** ... **Bobby Lashley** pinned **Orlando Jordan** ... **The Undertaker** defeated **Mark Henry** in a "Tulsa Streetfight" ... U.S. champion **Chris Benoit** beat **John Bradshaw Layfield** by submission ... **Rey Mysterio Jr.** beat **Finlay** ... World champion **Kurt Angle** defeated **Randy Orton** by disqualification. (03-25-06)

—Tom D'Amico

MUSKOGEE—Fellowship of Christian Wrestlers at Youth Central: **Cpl. James Warbois** defeated **Tommy Smash** ... **The Canadian Red Devil**, **The Canadian Luchadore**, & **Shane Morbid** defeated **Billy Walden Jr.**, **Sudden Impact**, & **Matt Emerald** ... **ICF** defeated **Mitch Carter** & **Bernard Funk** ... **Mike Taylor** pinned **Brett Taylor** ... **Pork Chop** defeated **J.P. Steele** ... **Brandon Groom** & **Angel** beat **Bobby Burns** & **Shawn Cross** ... **Timmy J** defeated **Paul Linam** ... **Michael York** won a battle royal. (04-09-06)

—C.M. Burnham

SAPULPA—Steel Rage Pro Wrestling at the Boys & Girls Club: **Tommy Smash** defeated **Diablo 1** and **Luc Lapointe** in a triple-threat match ... **Pork Chop** defeated **J.P. Steele** by reverse decision ... **Bobby Burns** defeated **Paul Linam** by countout ... **Terry Montana** defeated **Rancid** ... **Cpl. James Warbois** defeated **Jose Suzuki** ... X division champion **Mitch Carter** defeated **Kenny Campbell** ... **Shane Morbid** defeated heavyweight champion **Cade Sydal** in a no-disqualification match for the title. (04-07-06)

—C.M. Burnham

TULSA—Tornado Pro Wrestling at Owen Park Recreational Center: **Michael York** defeated light heavyweight champion **The Canadian Red Devil** for the title ... **Ryan**

Davidson defeated **Diablo Negro** ... **AWOL** defeated **Matt Emerald** ... **Poo Bear** & **Rico Suave** simultaneously pinned **Bernard Funk** in a triple-threat match ... The match between Tag team champions **Sexy Bologna** and **Justin Lee** & **Rocco Valentino** ended in a no-contest ... **Michael Faith** defeated Oklahoma State champion **Romero Contreras** for the title. (04-08-06)

—C.M. Burnham

PENNSYLVANIA

ALLENTOWN—World X-Treme Wrestling at the Crocodile Rock Cafe: **Mongoose** beat **Teddy Fine** ... **Dr. Spider** pinned **Malik** ... Women's champion **Alicia** pinned **Alere Littlefeather** ... **Notorious Inc.** beat **Independent All-Stars** and **Team X-Treme** for the vacant tag team titles ... **Untouchables** beat **Platinum Icons** ... **Acid Zero** pinned **Magnum X/L** ... Cruiserweight champion **Mercedes Martinez** beat **Mike Brown** ... **Afa Jr.** pinned **Havoc** in a loser-leaves-town match. (04-01-06)

—Eric Shaffer

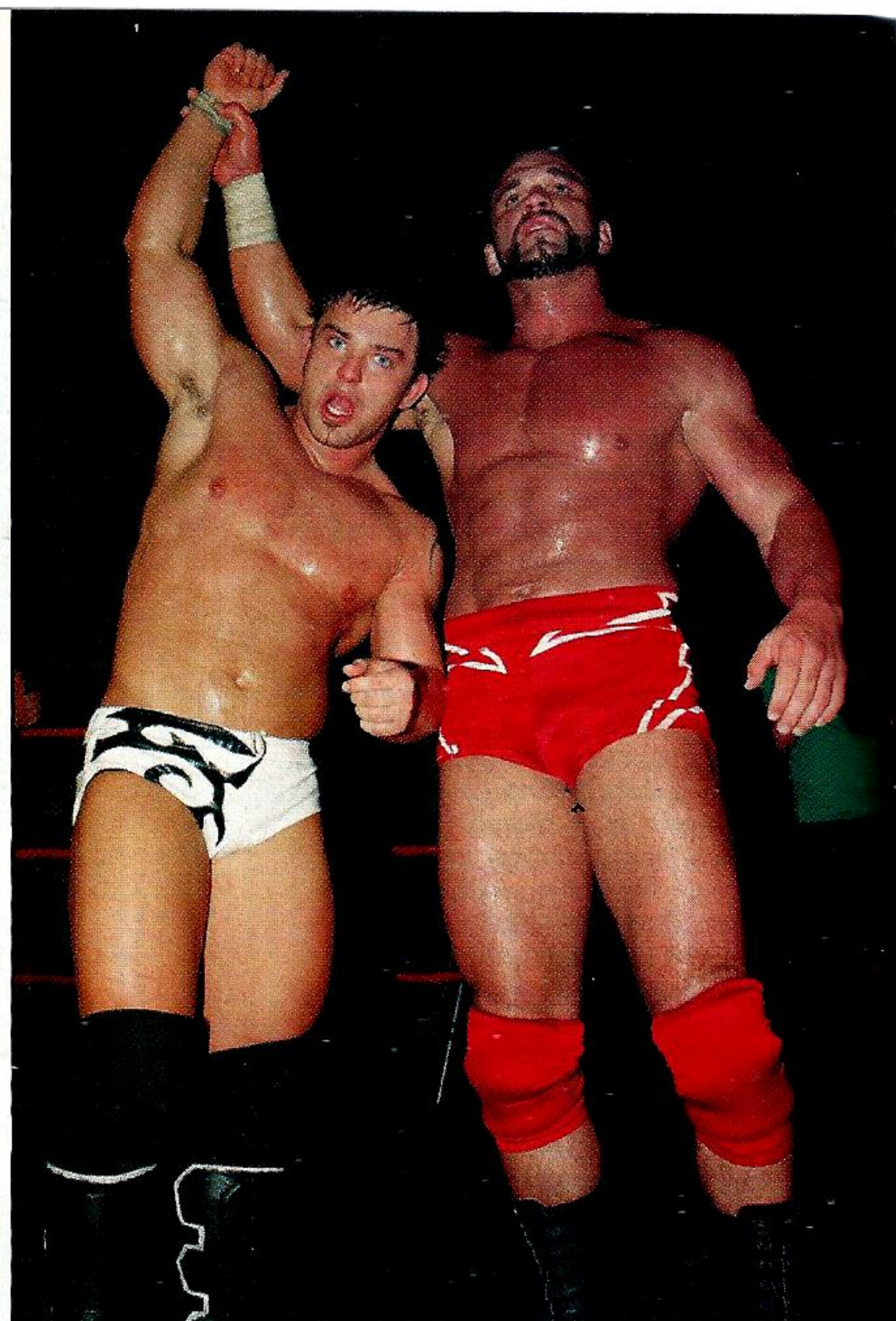
TOWER CITY—National Wrestling Superstars at Williams Valley High School: **Corvis Fear** defeated **Funky White Boy** ... **Hasheem Ali** defeated **Antonio Malave** ... **The Patriot** defeated **Hasheem Ali** ... **T-N-T** & **Saddam Insane** wrestled to a no-contest with **The Badda Bing Boys** ... **Nicky Oceans** defeated **J.D. Smooth** ... **Gavin Quest** defeated **Fantastic Max** by disqualification ... **Kamala** defeated **Sal Sincere**. (04-08-06)

—John Paul

SOUTH CAROLINA

LANCASTER—Birchfield Promotions at American Legion Building: **Angels of Anarchy** defeated **Riddleman** & **Steven** ... **Jason King** defeated **Jimmy Jack Funk Jr.** ... **Jason Jones** beat **George South Sr.** ... **Rex Rumble** & **Kid Kaos** defeated **Manchild** & **Kid Kwik** ... **Brad Thomas** pinned **George South Jr.** ... **Chris Hamrick** beat **Shea McGrady** ... **Shane Austin** defeated **Texas Ranger** ... **Ricky Morton** beat **Morbid** by disqualification ... **Johnny** & **Jay Eagle** defeated **Boomer B** & **Sonny Landel**. (04-07-06)

—Michael Carpenter



The tournament ended with a shocking upset as Richards defeated Haas. In a show of tremendous sportsmanship, Haas raises the hand of the victor.

TENNESSEE

NASHVILLE—WWE at Municipal Auditorium: **Super Crazy** won a cruiserweight battle royal over **Jamie Noble**, **Kid Kash**, **Paul London**, **Brian Kendrick**, **Sho Funaki**, **Psicosis**, and **Nunzio** ... **Paul Birchall** beat **William Regal** ... **Finlay** defeated **Tatanka** ... **The Boogeyman** beat **Booker T** by countout ... Smackdown tag team champions **M-N-M** beat **Matt Hardy** & **Bobby Lashley** ... **Chris Benoit** defeated **John Bradshaw Layfield** ... **Kurt Angle** won a four-way match against **Mark Henry**, **Randy Orton**, and **Rey Mysterio Jr.** to retain the World title.. (03-19-06)

—Paul Michaels

MEMPHIS—WWE at FedEx Forum: **Kane** beat **Carlito Caribbean Cool** ... **Shelton Benjamin** defeated **Ric Flair** and **Rob Van Dam** in a three-way match ... **Victoria** pinned **Torrie Wilson** ... **Triple-H** & **Shane McMahon** went to a no-contest with **Shawn Michaels** after **Vince McMahon** and **John Cena** interfered. (03-20-06)

—Richard Angelo

KINGSPORT—Championship Wrestling at the Civic Auditorium: **Beau James** beat **Brad Thomas** ... TV champion **Matt Scott** beat **Mike Cooper**, **Cody Ices**, **Dirty J**, **The Masked Assassin**, and **Mo Jenkins** in a six-way match ... **Tony Givens** & **Robbie**

Cassidy beat **Brian Compton** & **J.V. Insanity** ... **Eric Darkstorm** beat **Menace** ... Tag team champions **KMF Inc.** beat **Josh Cody** & **Ray Idol** ... **Wayne Adkins** defeated junior heavyweight champion **Nick Hammonds** to win the title.
(04-06-06)

—Jack Lover

LAFAYETTE—Southern Wrestling Association at the National Guard Armory: **Loose Cannon** beat **Billy Ray Valentine** ... **Tony Grande** defeated light heavyweight champion **Anthony Wayne** by countout ... **Blade** beat **John Watts** ... Heavyweight champion **American Psycho** defeated **Tim Scruggs** ... **Desperado** & **Steve Slaughter** beat tag team champions **Ray Spears** & **Jason Nesmith** in a non-title match ... **Matt Korbaine** regained the U.S. title from **Damien Payne** in an "anything goes" match.
(04-08-06)

—Lekisha F. Oliver

TEXAS

ARLINGTON—Professional Championship Wrestling Full Throttle at PCW Arena: TV champion **Damien** beat **James Johnson** ... **Nobe Bryant** went to a no-contest with **Stephen Murphy** ... **Lance Hoyt** beat **Apocalypse** ... **The Crusader** beat **Captain Canada** ... **Eddie Atlas** pinned **B.J. Turner** ... Heavyweight champion **Tim Storm** defeated **Wally Darkmon** ... **Mike Foxx** beat **David Young** ... **Mike Foxx** beat **Thomas Bussey**.
(04-08-06)

—Rob Moore

HUMBLE—Texas All-Star Wrestling at the Bingo Hall: **Brandon Biggs** beat **Nick Daniels** ... Cruiserweight champion **Dylan Starr** defeated **Justin Blaze** ... **Bobby 2Badd** pinned **Nate Slater** ... **Bubba Lee Travis** beat hardcore champion **Scoby Gober** to win the title ... Heavyweight champion **ZenZen** beat **Max Muscles** in a lumberjack match.
(04-01-06)

—Paul Adams

LUFKIN—Southwest Premier Wrestling in Lufkin on the Town Square: **New Age Dogg** defeated **Andrew Dalton** ... **Eagle** beat **Hallowmass Logan** by reverse decision ... **Jiggalo James Johnson** defeated **Andrew Dalton** ... **Lance Hoyt** defeated **Gemini** ... NWA Southwest junior heavyweight champion **Hallowmass Joseph** defeated **Jiggalo James Johnson**, **Robert Evans**, **J.T. Lamotta**, **Justin Sane**, and **Sean Cordova** in a six-way match ... **Seth Shai** defeated **Pendragon** ... Southwest tag team champions **Mass Destruction** defeated **Mace Malone** & **Eagle** ... **David Young** beat heavyweight champion **Lance Hoyt** to win the title.
(04-08-06)

—Jason Rand

MARSHALL—American Championship Wrestling at the ACW Arena: **Seth Shai** defeated **Spoiler 2000** ... **Chris Preston** defeated **Justin Sane** to win the Young Guns title ... **Roxbury Boyz** defeated

Hallowmass ... Heavyweight champion **New Age Dogg** defeated **Gemini**.
(04-08-06)

—Jason Rand

INTERNATIONAL

AUSTRALIA

SYDNEY—WWE at Sydney Superdome: **Paul London** & **Brian Kendrick** beat **Kid Kash** & **Gregory Helms** ... **Road Warrior Animal** pinned **Matt Hardy** ... **Sho Funaki** defeated **Jamie Noble** ... **The Boogeyman** beat **Orlando Jordan** ... **Rey Misterio Jr.** & **Bobby Lashley** defeated **M-N-M** by disqualification ... **Finlay** beat **Sylvan** ... U.S. champion **Chris Benoit** defeated **Booker T** ... World champion **Kurt Angle** beat **The Undertaker**, **Randy Orton**, and **Mark Henry** in a four-way match.
(03-03-06)

—Andrew Nelson

BRISBANE—WWE at Brisbane Entertainment Center: **Mark Henry** was awarded the "Brisbane Cup" after winning a 20-man battle royal ... **The Boogeyman** beat **Orlando Jordan** ... **Gregory Helms**, **Jamie Noble**, & **Kid Kash** defeated **Paul London**, **Brian Kendrick**, & **Sho Funaki** in a six-man tag team match ... **Melina** won the "Divas Down Under" bikini contest over **Jillian Hall** and **Kristal** ... **Rey Misterio Jr.** & **Bobby Lashley** beat **Randy Orton** & **Finlay** ... U.S. champion **Chris Benoit** defeated **Booker T** ... World champion **Kurt Angle** beat **Mark Henry** by disqualification when **Daivari** interfered.
(03-05-06)

—Andrew Nelson

IRELAND

DUBLIN—Celtic Pro Wrestling at the Dublin Marketplace: **Amazing Insano** pinned **Neo Dragon** ... **Napalm Hamilton** beat **Blake Norton** by submission ... **Darragh Galligan** pinned **Danny Demento** ... **Dragon Aisu** beat **David Dunn** ... **Dragon Aisu** beat **Napalm Hamilton** by submission ... **Amazing Insano** pinned **Darragh Galligan** ... **Amazing Insano** pinned **Dragon Aisu** to become champion.
(04-08-06)

—Mike Lano

JAPAN

TOKYO—All Japan Pro Wrestling at Tokyo Korakuen Hall: **Masa Fuchi** beat **Kikutaro** ... **D-Lo Brown** & **Matt Morgan** beat **Nobutaka Araya** & **Nobukazu Hirai** ...

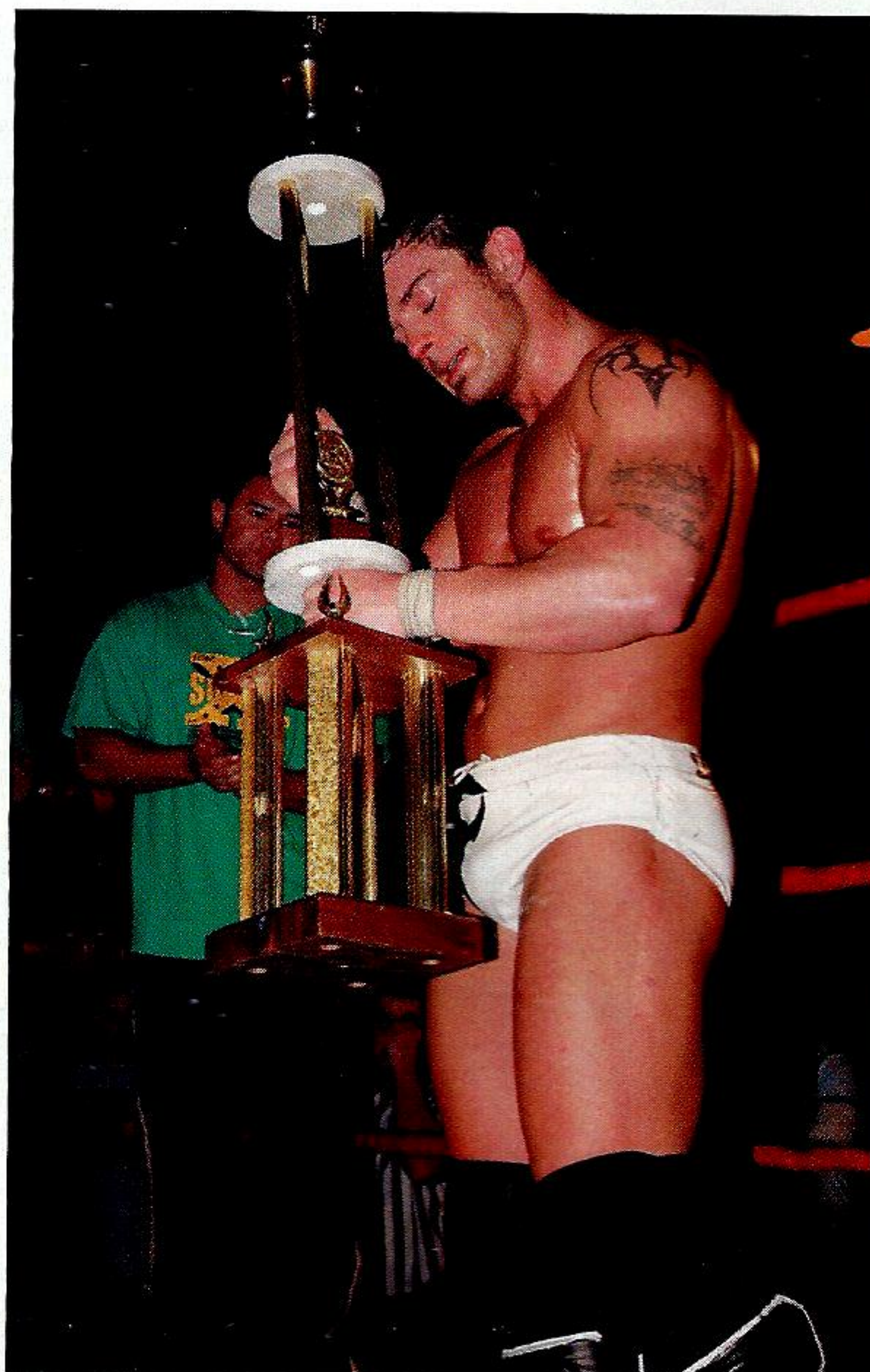
TARU, **Shuji Kondo**, & **YASSHI** defeated **Kaz Hayashi**, **NOSAWA Rongai**, & **MAZADA** in a six-man tag team match ... **Keiji Muto**, **AKIRA**, & **Ryuji Hijikata** beat **Kensuke Sasaki**, **Tomoaki Honma**, & **Brute Issei** in a six-man tag team match ... **Kohei Suwama** beat **Taiyo Kea** ... **Yutaka Yoshie** beat **Bull Buchanan** ... **Minoru Suzuki** pinned **Arashi** ... **Satoshi Kojima** beat **Katsuhiko Nakajima**.
(04-07-06)

—Koichi Yoshizawa

NEW ZEALAND

WELLINGTON—WWE at Westpac Stadium: Cruiserweight champion **Gregory Helms** beat **Kid Kash** and **Jamie Noble** in a three-way ... **Sho Funaki** pinned **Sylvan** ... Smackdown tag team champions **M-N-M** beat **Paul London** & **Brian Kendrick** ... **Road Warrior Animal** defeated **Matt Hardy** ... **Bobby Lashley** beat **Finlay** ... **The Boogeyman** pinned **Orlando Jordan** ... U.S. champion **Chris Benoit** beat **Booker T** ... **Rey Misterio Jr.** defeated **Randy Orton** ... World champion **Kurt Angle** beat **The Undertaker** and **Mark Henry** by disqualification in a three-way match.
(03-04-06)

—David Cross



With its rich history and tradition for making wrestlers' careers, the Super 8 is widely considered the premier independent tournament in professional wrestling. Here, champion Richards cherishes the moment.

PWI classic

From the April 1989 issue of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*

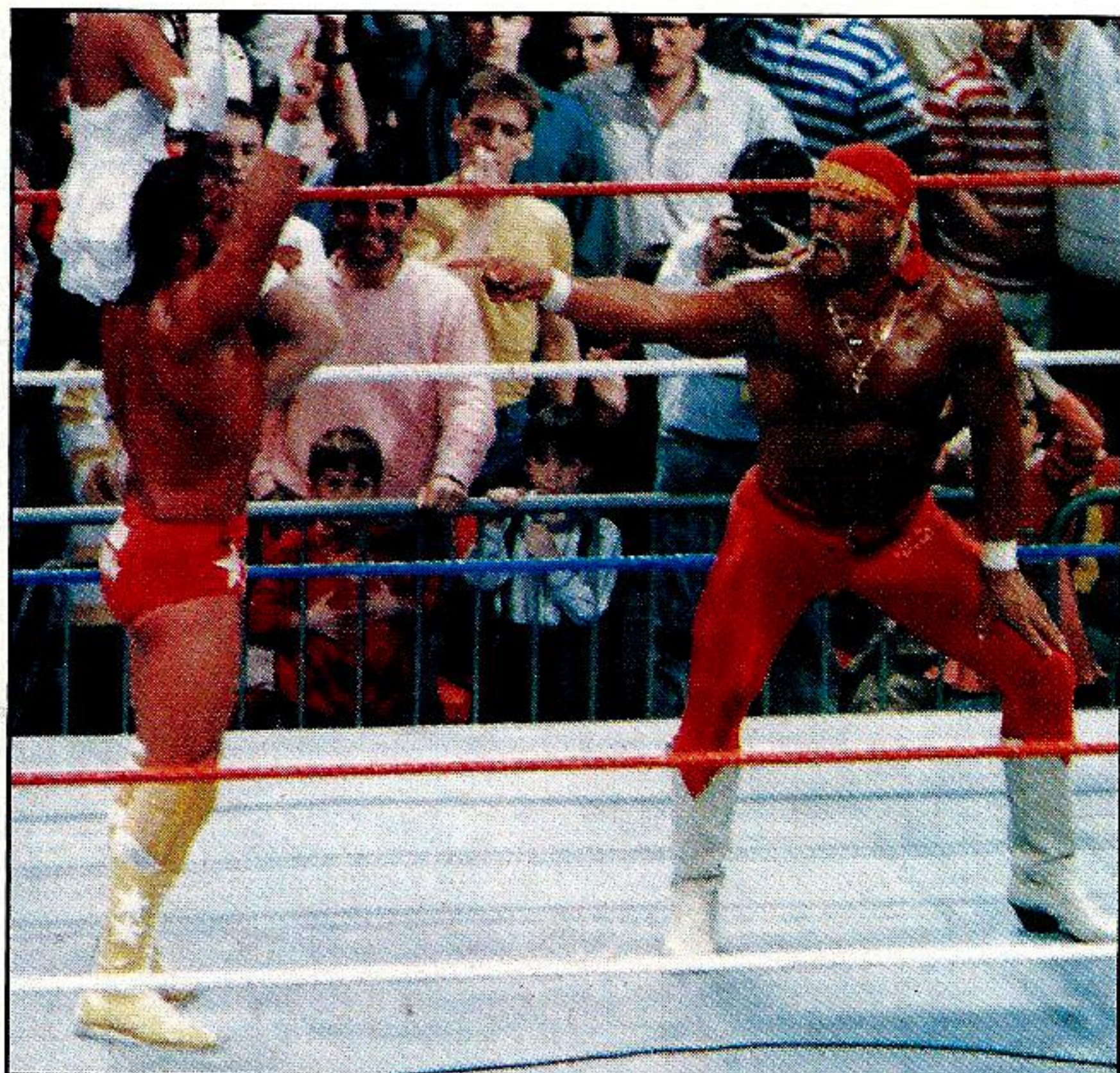


HAS SAVAGE SIGNED TO WRESTLE HOGAN AT WRESTLE- MANIA V?

The renewal of an old rivalry could turn into 1989's Match of the Year. WWF World champion Randy Savage has demanded a match against tag team partner Hulk Hogan—and apparently he's going to get one!

MARK YOUR CALENDAR for Sunday, March 19. That's WrestleMania V Sunday (exact time and place to be announced), and, by all indications WWF World champion Randy Savage will meet Hulk Hogan in a main event that figures to draw the largest audience in history.

In fact, the "Macho Man," who won the title at WrestleMania IV thanks to Hogan's help, may have already signed to wrestle his friend—or former friend! According to WWF sources, however, Hogan is resisting a match against Savage if it is to be held under unfriendly



All seemed well with the two most popular superstars in the WWF after Hulk Hogan aided Randy Savage in winning the World championship at WrestleMania IV. The two would later team up, and one of the most formidable alliances in wrestling history was formed.



terms. Hogan was hoping that Savage would eventually offer him a match, not challenge him to one.

"You see, Hogan has nothing at all against Savage," said a mutual friend who requested anonymity. "Hogan would like to wrestle Savage merely because Savage has the title. But he's enjoyed teaming with Savage; Hogan also feels that if he can't have the belt, Savage might as well have it. In the final analysis, however, there's no way Hogan's going to back down. When was the last time Hogan backed down from anyone or anything?"

Never. Meanwhile, the WWF hierarchy, realizing the huge payday that would result, is virtually salivating at the thought of signing this match.

"At this point, Hogan-Savage would be bigger than Andre-Hogan was," former WWF World champion Buddy Rogers said. "It's the kind of match that even I would pay to see, and I don't pay to see many matches anymore."

The WWF was hoping, however, that it could hold off Savage until WrestleMania V. One source told us that Savage is hoping for a match against Hogan on *The Main Event*, tentatively scheduled for Saturday, February 4, from 8-9:00 p.m. on NBC. The WWF would prefer not holding the match on free TV, for obvious financial considerations, although it would undoubtedly result

in a resounding ratings victory.

If successful in delaying Savage, the situation that has developed would solve a major problem for the WWF: signing a hot main event for WrestleMania V. In fact, Hogan vs. Savage may be the only matchup of WrestleMania main-event stature remaining in the WWF.

Savage vs. Hogan could be even bigger than an inter-federation showdown such as Ric Flair vs. Hogan, or Jerry Lawler vs. Savage. Having held the one-two spots in our Most Popular ratings for several months, Savage and Hogan are undoubtedly the two most popular stars in pro wrestling. Their rivalry back in 1986 and '87 was one of the hottest in WWF history; the addition of time, a title change, and Savage's jealousy over Elizabeth, would make the renewal of the feud hotter than the original.

If you need proof that this match

is bound to happen, remember these vivid images:

At the conclusion of the Survivor Series, Hogan hugged Elizabeth while Savage tried to recover from a horrible beating suffered at the hands of King Haku. Moments later, Savage yelled something at Hogan, pointed at him, then glared in his face. It was an evil look, easily the most memorable picture of Thanksgiving Day '88.

Then, on December 7 at the Tampa Sundome in Florida, the rift became even wider. Hogan came to the ring with Elizabeth—but without Savage—for a singles match against Akeem, who came out with Slick and Big Bossman. Midway through the match, Akeem and Bossman ganged up on Hogan and beat him mercilessly. Elizabeth ran back to the dressing room, presumably to fetch Savage, but came back alone.

Pro Wrestling Illustrated ratings

April 1989

WWF

World champion: Randy Savage

1. The Ultimate Warrior
2. Bad News Brown
3. Hulk Hogan
4. Big Bossman
5. Andre the Giant
6. The Honky Tonk Man
7. Hacksaw Duggan
8. Ted DiBiase
9. King Haku
10. Curt Hennig

NWA

World champion: Ric Flair

1. Barry Windham
2. Lex Luger
3. Rick Steiner
4. Sting
5. Bam Bam Bigelow
6. Ron Simmons
7. Eddie Gilbert
8. Dusty Rhodes
9. Mike Rotundo
10. Steve Williams

TAG TEAMS

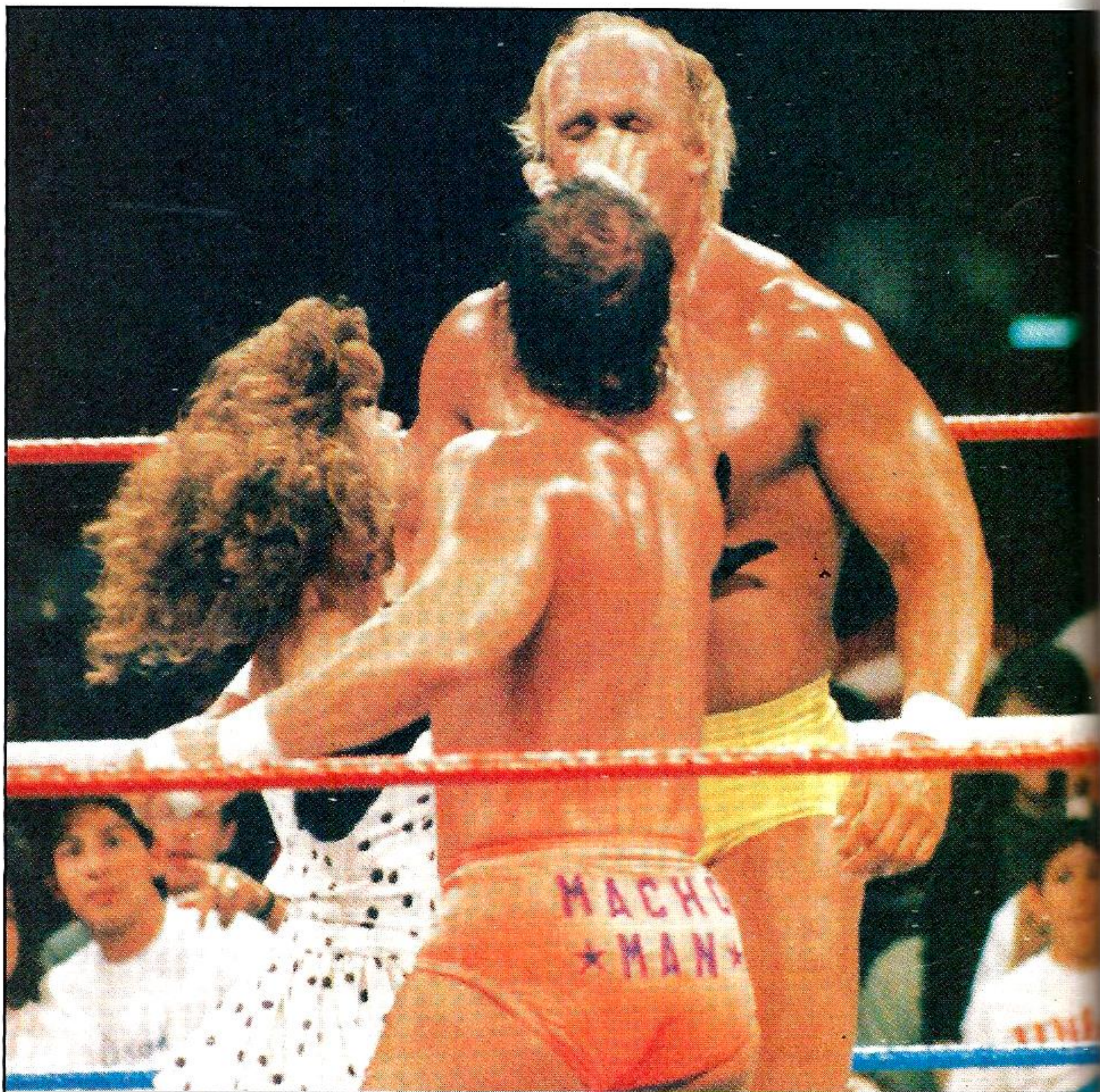
1. The Road Warriors
2. Demolition
3. Pat Tanaka & Paul Diamond
4. The Fantastics
5. Stan Lane & Bobby Eaton
6. Warlord & Barbarian
7. The Samoan SWAT Team
8. Dennis Condrey & Randy Rock
9. The British Bulldogs
10. Robert Fuller & Jimmy Golden

MOST POPULAR

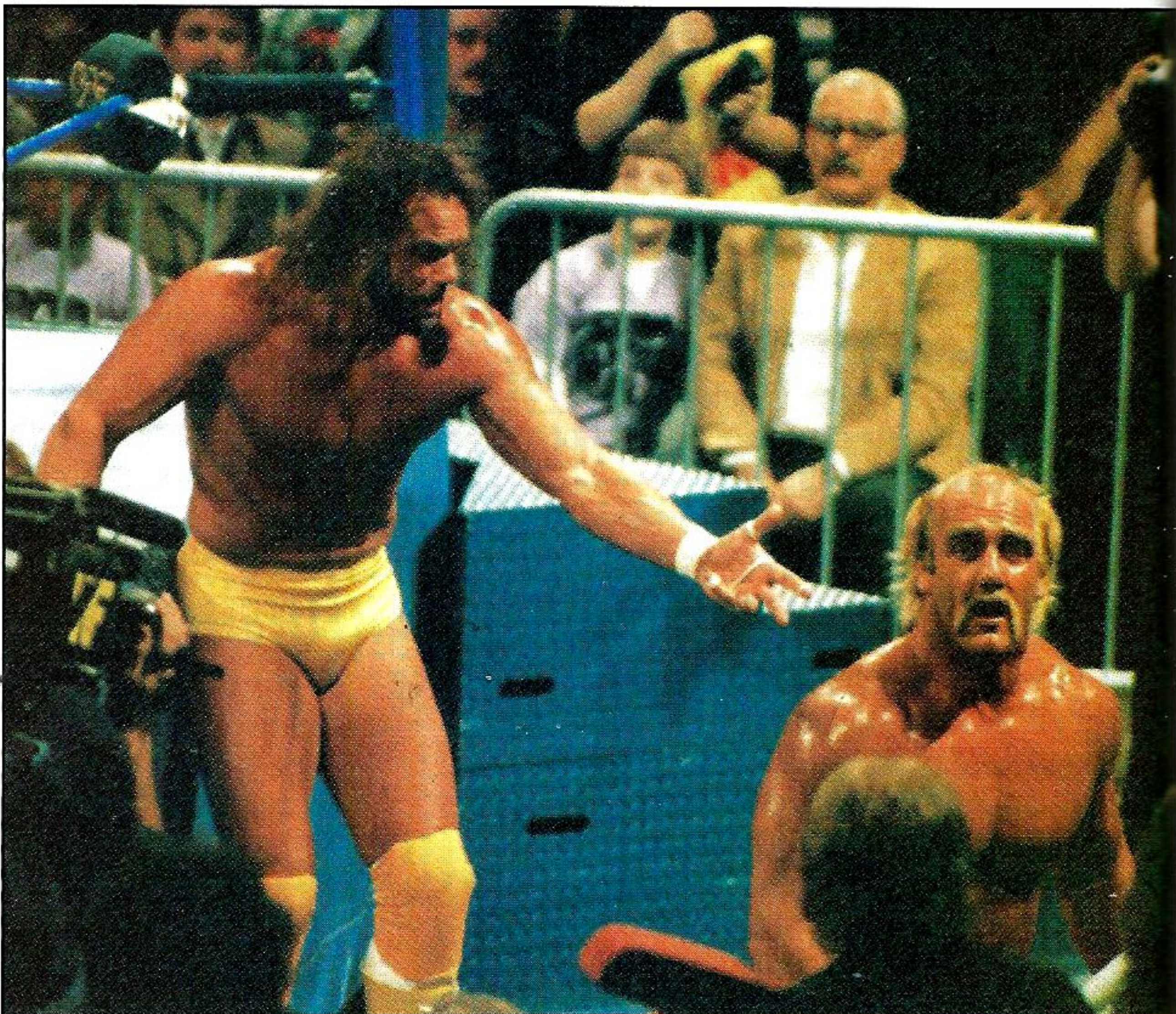
1. Hulk Hogan
2. Randy Savage
3. Sting
4. The Ultimate Warrior
5. Lex Luger
6. Rick Steiner
7. Hacksaw Duggan
8. Dusty Rhodes
9. Kerry Von Erich
10. Jake Roberts

MOST HATED

1. Big Bossman
2. Ric Flair
3. Barry Windham
4. Rick Rude
5. Bad News Brown
6. Andre The Giant
7. Mike Rotundo
8. Robert Fuller
9. Iceman Parsons
10. Jerry Lawler



Eventually, Hogan's grandstanding, coupled with Savage's paranoia, made it only inevitable that the sometimes-shaky friendship forged between the WWF's top two superstars would come to a halt.



Suddenly, Elizabeth got too close to the action and was grabbed by Bossman, who handcuffed her wrists together. Only then did Savage come running out of the dressing room with a chair to rescue his lovely manager. Elizabeth then went to console Hogan, but a visibly angered Savage pulled her away. The three stars left together, but there were no handshakes, no high fives—and no posing, which broke a Hogan-Savage-Elizabeth tradition.

Is the Hogan-Savage honeymoon over? By all indications, the answer is a resounding “yes.” Savage is not willing to share Elizabeth with anyone, including the “Hulkster.” One can only imagine how irate Savage was when he discovered that Elizabeth came to the ring with Hogan. He has always been a jealous man, and he is, indeed, a savage beast. Only about 15 months ago, Savage was one of the most feared and hated men in wrestling.

Unfortunately, Savage is *not* a deep thinker. He apparently doesn't realize that Hogan doesn't want to become romantically involved with Elizabeth; married with a young daughter, Hogan merely likes having Elizabeth on hand for inspiration and managerial guidance.

Savage has also forgotten that without Hogan he'd never be where he is now. On at least two occasions, Hogan saved Savage from serious injury; at WrestleMania IV, he hit Ted DiBiase across the back with a chair and helped Savage win the belt.

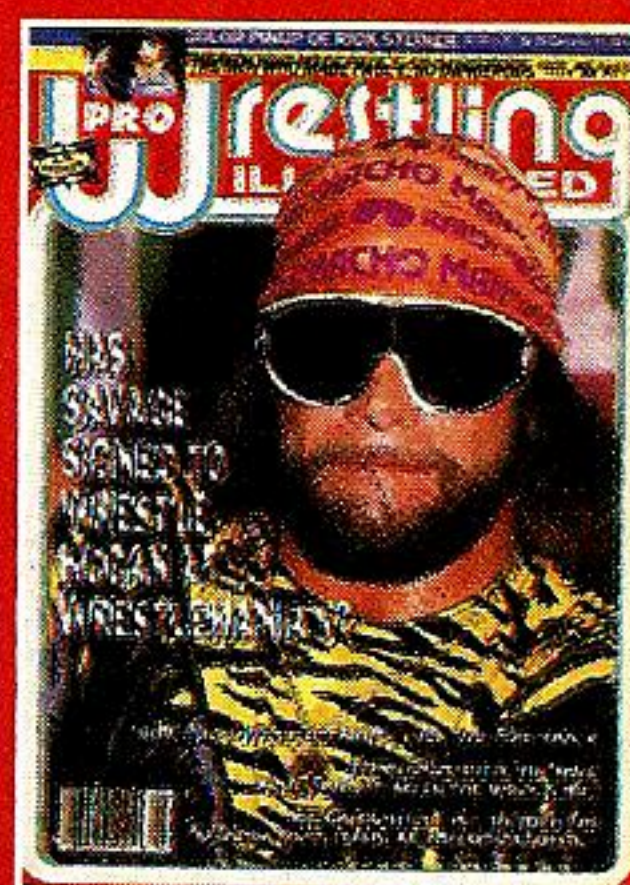
It has become obvious that Savage cannot carry out a lasting friendship with anyone except Elizabeth. Although Hogan is not without fault in this situation—he shamelessly posed and celebrated at the Survivor Series while Savage was badly in need of help—he must be credited for never publicly demanding a title match against his friend.

Now, apparently, he doesn't have to make demands.

Now, apparently, he's going to get what he never asked for. □

Pro Wrestling Illustrated, April 1989

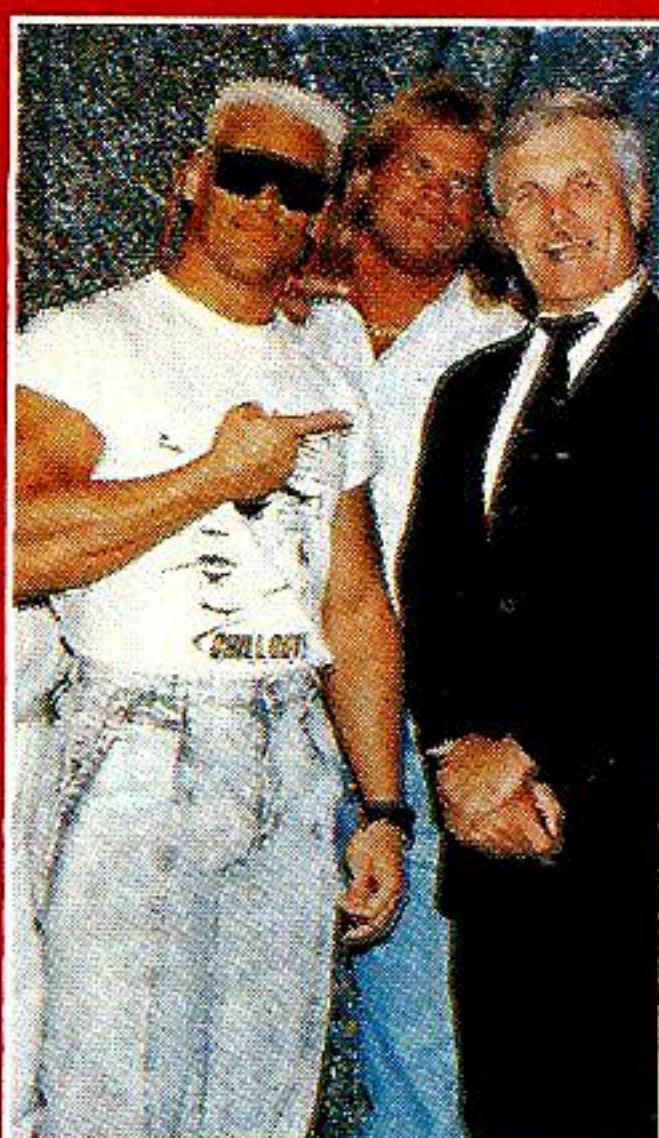
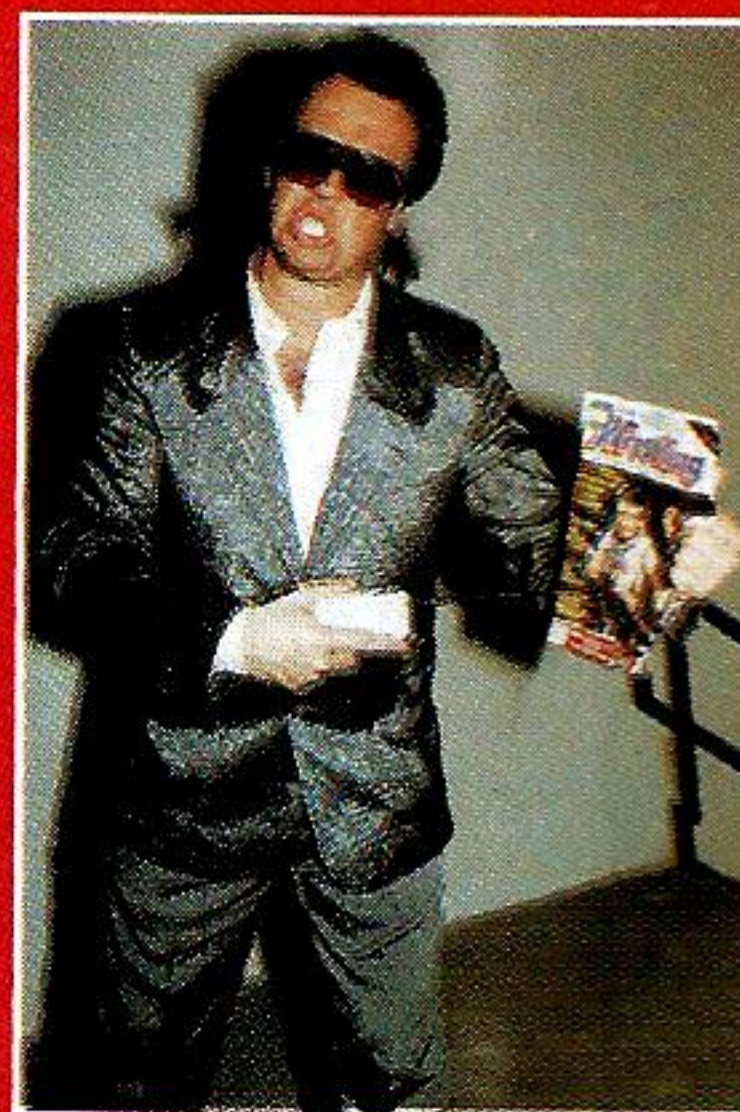
The cover: While the pending explosion of the “Mega Powers” encompasses the entire cover, perhaps the more historic event covered by the issue is found closer to the bottom of the page. The purchase of the NWA from Jim Crockett by Ted Turner was, at that time, predicted to be “the dawn of a new era for wrestling’s oldest federation.” It took a few years, but Turner’s World Championship Wrestling would bypass the WWF and later become the premier company in the industry.



Dogging Canada: When the British Bulldogs fell out of WWF tag team championship contention in the late-1980s they did what anyone would do—they went home to rethink their position in the industry. Meanwhile, as the duo regained its bearings in Calgary’s historic Stampede Wrestling, they easily won the company’s tag team championship. Then Associate Editor David Rosenbaum felt this was something of a step back for the Bulldogs, comparing it to an Olympic marathon runner entering a 5K “fun run.”

He Learned From The Best: Professional wrestling may not have gotten

to the point it is today (good or bad) without the innovation of one Paul E. Dangerously. Later the maniacal genius behind ECW, Paul E. got his start in the business years ago and learned from some of the best. By studying legendary managers such as Freddie Blassie, Lou Albano, and The Grand Wizard, Dangerously became one of the most reviled cornermen in all of wrestling—and he wasn't afraid to let you know that.

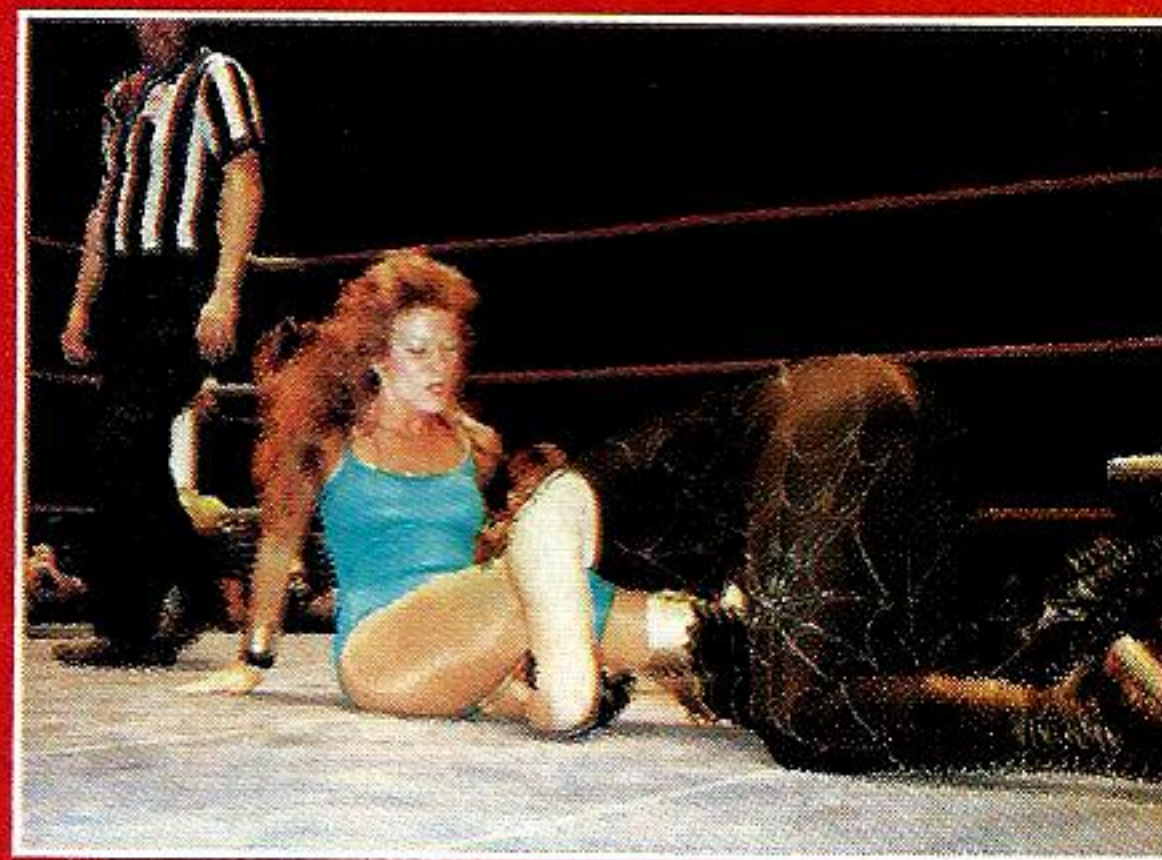


In The Wrasslin' Business:

The always-ambitious Ted Turner purchased the NWA from Jim Crockett and immediately had lofty plans for the organization. Using the wildly successful WWF as his business model, Turner planned to expand the appeal of his organization with the goal being to compete with and then overtake the WWF. History would show that Turner's premonition would come to fruition a few years later. However, WCW's lasting impression on the industry would ultimately be the blueprint for how not to run a wrestling promotion.

Back Then, They Were Called “Wrestlers”: After bolting from the WWF following her women's championship loss to perennial titleholder Fabulous Moolah, Wendi

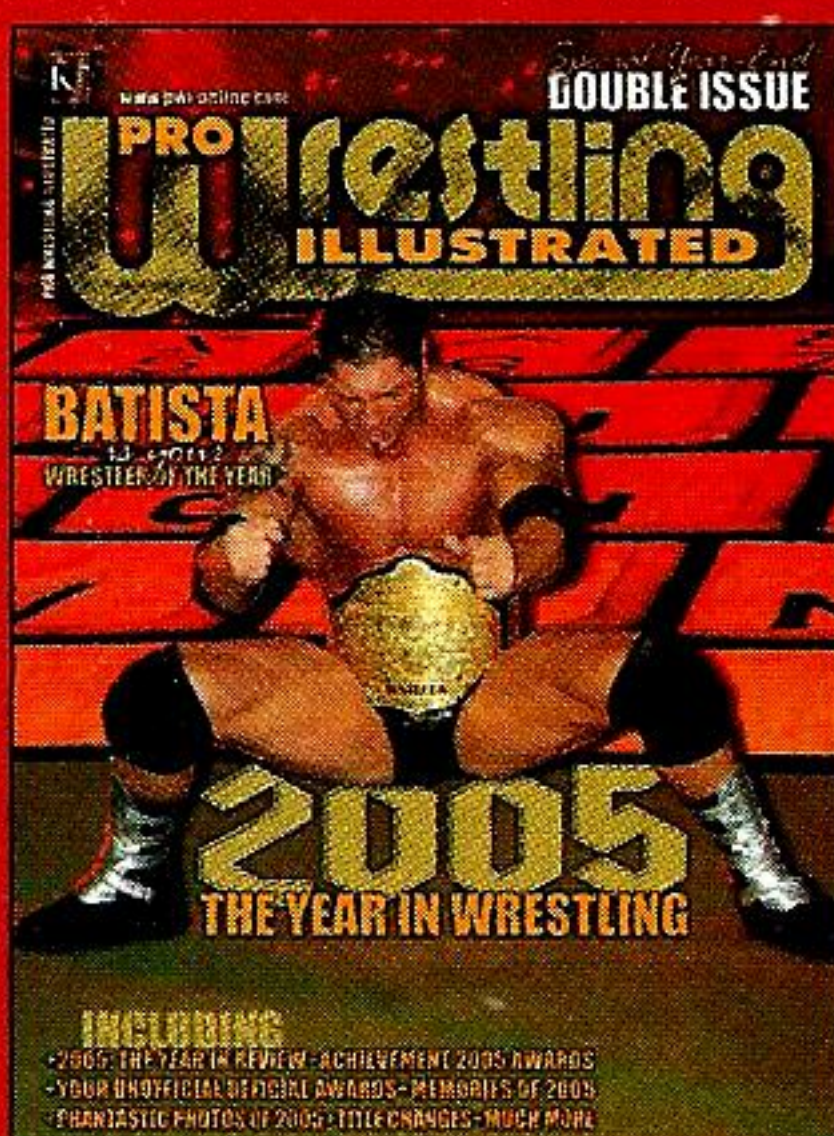
Richter reappeared in the AWA to win that promotion's title. The former WWF champion was drawn back into championship contention by her hatred of then-AWA women's champion Madusa Miceli. Richter referred to Miceli as a “cheap, tawdry, tramp who offers nothing to the sport but a mouth that's uncouth, untamed, and unkempt,” which would, ironically, make her perfect for the WWE women's division today.



between falls

PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED welcomes readers' comments on any of our stories or columns. Send letters to: **BETWEEN FALLS** Box 1148, Ft. Washington, PA 19034
Or you can e-mail your comments to prowrestlingillustrated@yahoo.com
Letters preceded by a ☎ indicate letters left by fans on the PWI Hotline (1-900-226-4PWI; see ad elsewhere in this issue).

AWARDS FALLOUT



If there's one thing you can count on other than death and taxes, it's that our annual PWI Achievement Awards issue will provoke passionate debate. In this year's issue, the hot topic was 2005's Most Popular Wrestler, John Cena.

"For the life of me, I can't understand what people see in Cena," wrote Chris Schultz of Raleigh, North Carolina. "He's a marginal wrestler at best and a cartoon character on the mike. Maybe you have to be 10 years old to buy into his shtick."

Reader Jack Barrett stood up for "The Doctor Of Thuganomics."

"It's become trendy to dis Cena, but just look at the number of people wearing his T-shirts and waving signs at him, and you can see he's the obvious choice for Most Popular Wrestler of the Year."

Joshua Zavitz was more interested in the 2005 Rookie of the Year. "Bobby Lashley has been impressing me more and more each week," he wrote. "I think when people look back on these Achievement Awards in five years, they are going to realize that PWI readers were ahead of the curve."

TNA'S NEXT BIG MOVE

It's looking likely that Brock Lesnar will soon be able to work for any promotion in the world. Personally, I think TNA should get to work signing him as soon as possible. He would certainly create a lot of interest, in the short term at least.

I don't want to see TNA build a promotion around former WWE talent, as it does need to create its own identity. However, as long as they get the balance right between big name stars and up-and-coming talent, I think TNA has a bright future. And I, personally, would very much like to see Brock show up on *Impact* and F-5 Jeff Jarrett.

I really do think a Brock/Jarrett feud would be interesting to watch, and I do think that if they were to clash on PPV, it could perhaps draw a record buy rate for TNA and maybe even get some WWE fans tuning in to see how Lesnar handles life in TNA. I hope it happens.

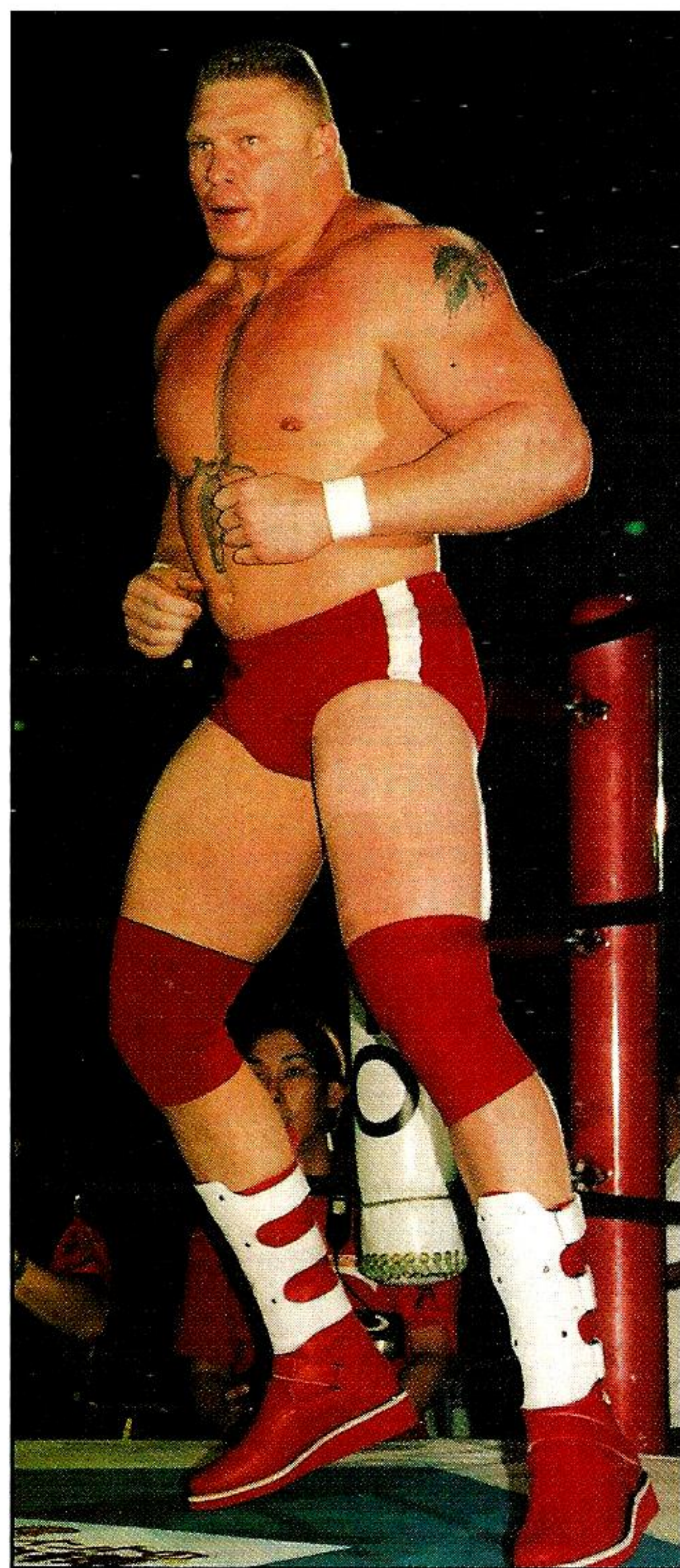
STEPHEN PARRY

supersoniclynx@aol.com

HECKUVA LETTER

I am writing to say thanks for the balanced feedback printed in PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED regarding Triple-H. I know most people love to hate him, but I am a *Huge* fan, and can think of plenty of great *H*-words to describe the best wrestler of today. *Handsome*; *Hard working*; *Hair* (that most women would love); *Handy* (with a *Hammer*); *Hilarious*; *Happy* (albeit whilst being evil); *Heroic*; *Hunter* (by name and by nature); *Heavyset* (a great build for any wrestling god); *Heart-warming* (in his quest to rescue Flair from himself); *Helpful* (trying to help Batista move to Smackdown); *He-man*; *Horsemanship* (as he showed us his skills in the WrestleMania 21 trailer); *Historic* (as per his moving portrayal of William Wallis in same trailer); *Heartfelt* (in his fluffy moments with his doggie co-star in *Blade Trinity*); and *Hungry*.

Anyway, enough already. Basically, I think he is *Habsolutely Hinccredible* and I'm disappointed when he's not involved in WWE storylines, because he is very obviously "that damn good" at suckering everybody into his on-screen wrestling *Heel* per-



The "Verdict" is in, well, not exactly. But should Brock Lesnar win his freedom to compete in the U.S., reader Stephen Parry believes that Lesnar's addition would help further TNA's appeal.

sona. That, in and of itself, is a credit to how *Hawsome* he really is!

MARGARET PAYNE
tiggertheterrier@hotmail.co.uk

WORTHY TORCHBEARER

I am writing in response to Sarah Bergey's comments in the "Between Falls" section of the year-end March 2006 issue of *PWI* ("Planet Christian?"). I have only one thing to say: Thank you! There aren't very many fans around the world who truly appreciate the abilities that Christian has, both in the ring and on the mike. He is one of the most versatile, all-around performers in the business today, and it's great to see him wearing heavyweight gold.

On a side note, now that TNA has a solid champion in place, it desperately needs to start creating homegrown stars. TNA's run just about the length of its existence on former WWE and WCW talent. The only notable exceptions to this rule would be A.J. Styles, Monty Brown, Christopher Daniels, and AMW. TNA has plenty of talent on the roster. Samoa Joe is poised to be the next breakout star, but there are guys like Abyss, Lance Hoyt, and A-1 who can carry the heavyweight division.

The X division has an innumerable amount of stars in the making, including Petey Williams, Chris Sabin, Roderick Strong, and Cassidy Riley. With the right strategy and clever planning, TNA has the potential to be what WCW



William "The Refrigerator" Perry's induction into WWE's Hall of Fame during WrestleMania 22 weekend is a further illustration of how nonsensical the selection process is, argues reader Howard Prost.

was during the Monday Night Wars without suffering WCW's fate.

JEFF JUDD
heluvajobu@yahoo.com

HALL OF SHAME

The induction of Verne Gagne and Bret Hart (even Sherri Martel) gave me hope that WWE Hall of Fame was becoming real, a testament to legends of the sport. Maybe WWE was past the self-serving Pete Rose epics. Then they

go and induct William "The Refrigerator" Perry, who wasn't even good enough to make the football Hall of Fame.

Please, WWE, deal with the people who were in the trenches before you took over (when there was something other than WWE), *before* you add celebs. Maybe in the future you could add some degree of legitimacy to your Hall by having nominations from the fans of wrestling. Please make your Hall real!

HOWARD PROST
fbp@sbcglobal.net

PW/Hotline Extra!

Your answers to our question of the week!

TNA recently signed Scott Steiner and is rumored to be in talks with Bill Goldberg. How do you feel about TNA's efforts to sign older stars from WCW? Will those acquisitions help or hurt the company? (Question for the week of March 20 to 26, 2006)

Hotline callers respond: "I think TNA has to take it on a case-by-case basis," said Larry Franklin of Hammond, New York. "Steiner can be an asset as a foil for Sting and possibly against some homegrown TNA guys who could use the rub, like Lance Hoyt and Abyss. But I wouldn't make a point to bring in guys just because they used to be in WCW."

"Steiner and Goldberg are damaged goods," said Enrique Chavez of Detroit, Michigan. "They both had good runs more than six years ago in WCW, then fizzled out in WWE. When TNA brings guys like that in, it just shows that their product is second-rate compared to WWE."

"Goldberg vs. Samoa Joe could be a real dream match," said Vince Sweeney of Tampa, Florida. "TNA needs more stars who are bigger than life, if only to help the current batch of guys to become bigger stars than they already are. WWE has let a lot of talented guys sit on the sidelines, and TNA would be wise to bring them in for a look."

WHAT ABOUT RAVEN?

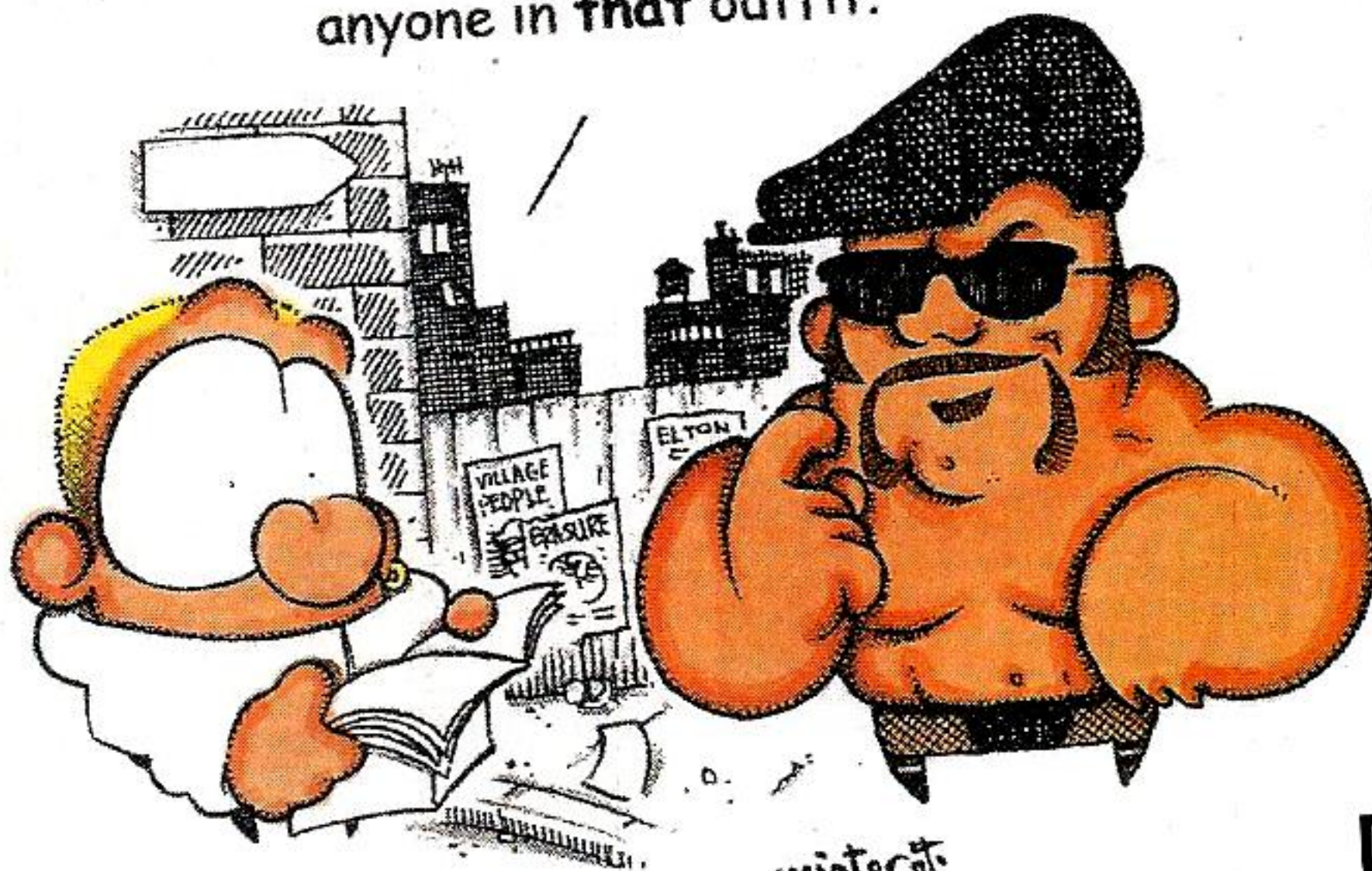
I was happy to read the year-end awards, as always. The only thing that disappointed me was that Raven did not win Wrestler of the Year, as he deserved to. In 2005, he finally won the NWA title after fighting for over two years to get it. He fought through chairs, tables, staple guns, and thumbtacks, and that was just in his match against Abyss! He fought through everyone until he was robbed by Jeff Jarrett and AMW. Raven will get the belt back, whether Larry Zbyszko likes it or not, and show why he should have won the award.

BOBBY PITTS
San Jose, CA □

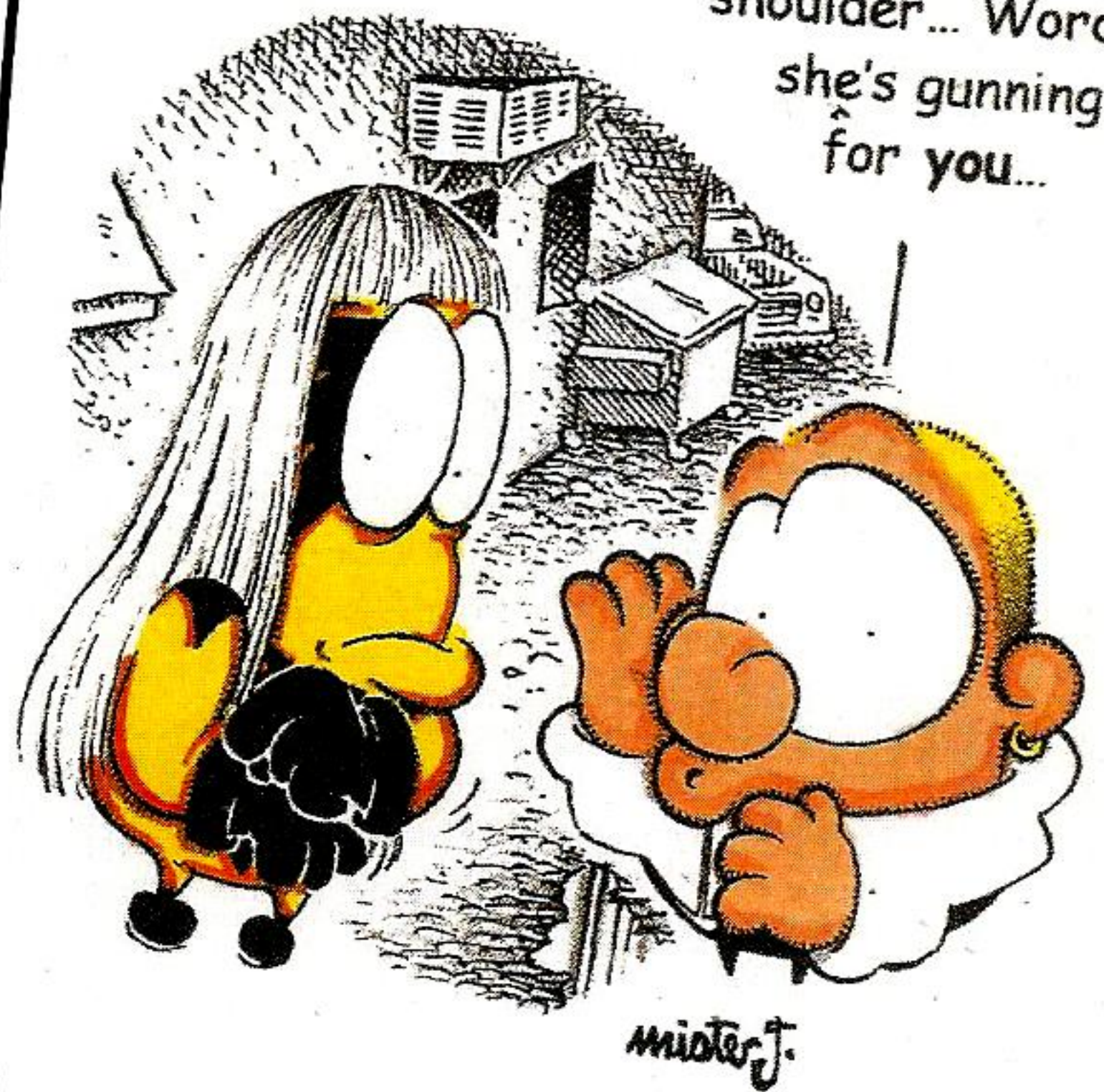
Drawing Blood

By Jason Conlan

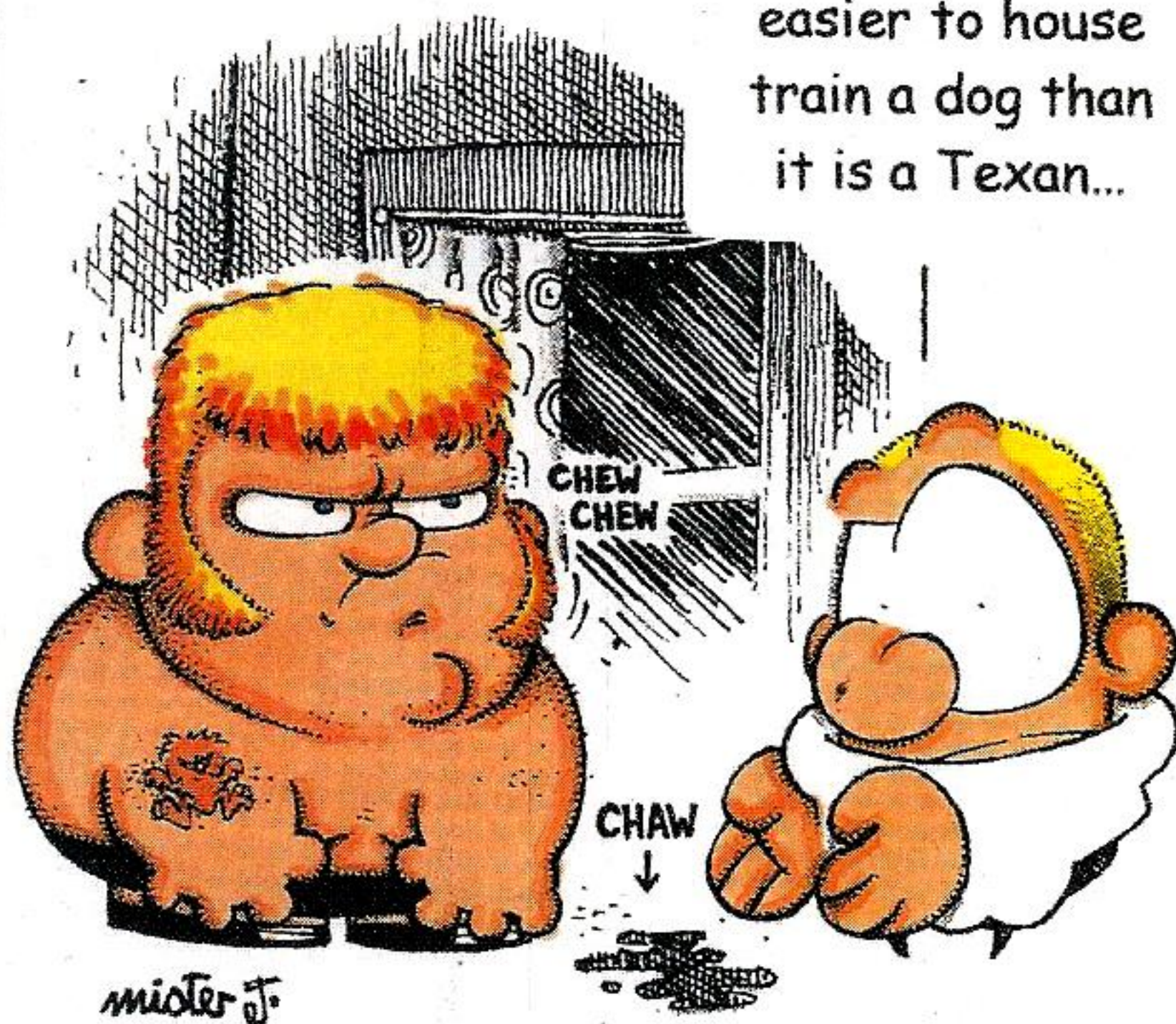
You might very well be the "con-man", but you ain't conning anyone in that outfit.



Mama Benjamin found some blonde hairs on Shelton's shoulder... Word is she's gunning for you...

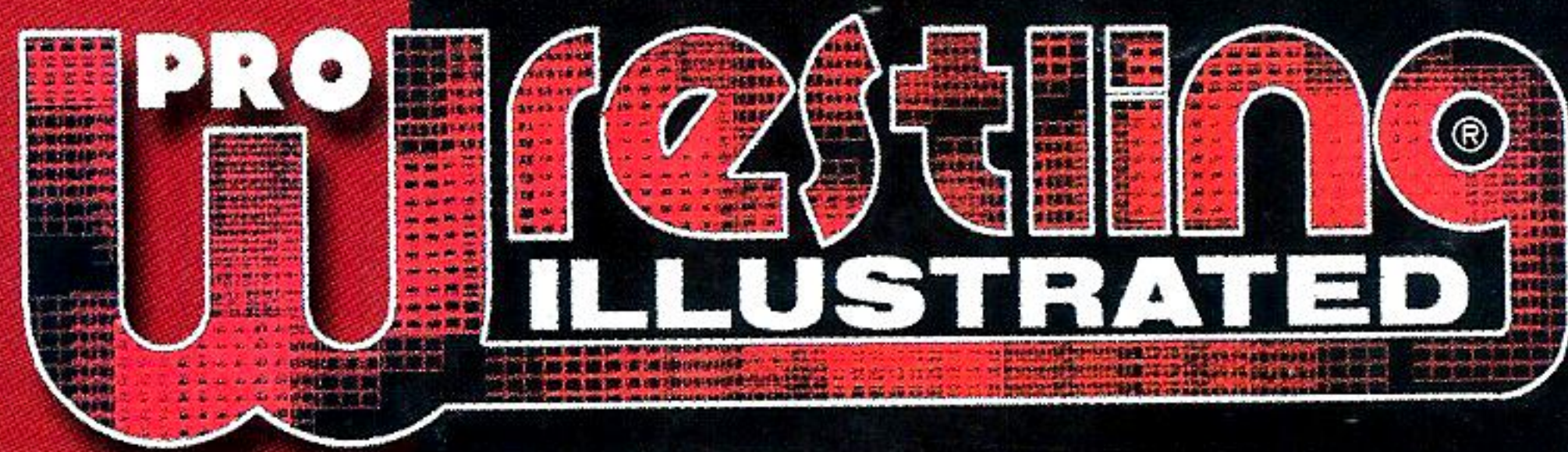


I tell you, it's easier to house train a dog than it is a Texan...



What's this... One Nite In China?!? I love a good travelog...





HOTLINE

Hosted by Dan Murphy

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